

McCabe United Methodist Church

January 31, 2010

Exodus 3:1-15

"I Am"

by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Exodus, Chapter 3, and I'm reading verses 1-15.

“One day Moses was taking care of the sheep and goats of his father-in-law, Jethro, the Priest of Midian and Moses decided to lead them across the desert to Sinai, the holy mountain. There an angel of the Lord appeared to him from a burning bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire but it was not burning up. “This is strange”, he said to himself, “I’ll go over and see why the bush isn’t burning up.” When the Lord saw Moses coming near the bush he called to him by name and Moses answered, “here I am.” God replied, “Don’t come any closer Moses, but take off your sandals for the ground where you are standing is holy. I am the God who was worshiped by your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”. Moses was afraid to look at God and so he hid his face and the Lord said, “I have seen how my people are suffering as slaves in Egypt and I have heard them beg for my help. Because of the way they are being mistreated I feel sorry for them and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and I will bring my people out of Egypt into a country where there is good land rich with milk and honey and I will give them the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. My people have begged for my help and I have seen how cruel the Egyptians are to them. Now, go to the king, I am sending you to lead my people out of his country.” But Moses said “Who am I to go to the king and lead your people out of Egypt.” God replied, “I will be with you and you will know that I am the one who sent you when you worship me on this mountain when you have led by people out of Egypt.” Moses answered, “I will tell the people of Israel that the God their ancestors worshiped sent me to them but what shall I say if they ask me your name.” God said to Moses, “I Am the eternal God, so tell them that the Lord, whose name is I Am has sent you. This is my name forever and it is the name that the people must use from now on.”

The word of God, for the people of God, Thanks be to God.

Well, I have a story. There was a man hiking through the woods and as he was walking along enjoying the sunshine and the beautiful scenery, he heard some crashing behind him coming out of some bushes and as he look over his shoulder a great big bear had stepped out onto the trail. Seeing the bear the man took off at a dead run. He said “Oh, gee, God, somebody help me, anybody, help.” As he is running along he is screaming and he is praying for help. About that time a great big thunder cloud rolls up and it starts pounding rain and then there is sleet and then there is lightning flashing around him and there is thunder and he is just beside himself. He is thinking “Now I’ve got this to worry about besides the bear” and he looks over his

shoulder and sure enough the bear is still chasing him and he is getting closer. He is running for all he is worth and he is running along the trail and he screams out for help again. Just then he looks over his shoulder and as he cries out for help he stumbles, he trips on a rock and he trips in the mud and he plunges, head first, off a ledge down this enormous cliff. But as he is going over, there is a tree branch that he grabs onto and he is able to save himself from falling to rocks that are hundreds and hundreds of feet below him. So he is looking down at those jagged rocks and then he looks up and the bear has reached the cliff above him and it is sitting there snarling and drool is dripping from its mouth and he looks around and he just shouts, “help” and he says a prayer of desperation, “help, is anybody there, help me” and the man hears a voice. The voice says “I’ll help you, let go.” Well the man is beside himself. He looks down at the rocks and he looks up at the bear and he says “Help, I need help.” The voice from all around him answers “I will catch you, I will help you, let go.” The man looks down at the rocks and he looks up at the bear and he looks around and he says “Is there anyone else up there?”

Well, I think in today’s story Moses is having a bit of an “Is there anyone else up there?” kind of a moment and who could blame him. Some interesting things just to set the scene here. But Moses, of course, was a prince of Egypt. He was raised in Pharaohs s courts, he probably knew this king personally. But, through a series of events and a moment of nationalistic pride and fervor for his people, and on an impulse a moment of murder, where he took the life on an Egyptian slave driver. Moses was driven from Egypt in fear for his life. He ends up in Midean. Well this Prince of Egypt, who was trained with the best education possible for his day and age, at the center of power and civilization, ends up in Midean, a backwater country, ends up as a shepherd, a backwater job, tending the sheep of the high priest, his father-in-law, Jethro. What is interesting, though, it appears that Moses has settled into this life pretty well for he is comfortable enough to take these animals to the far side of the desert. Moses knows his stuff. He knows all the back ways, he knows every nook and cranny of this desert and he is comfortable enough to lead these animals he is tending for his father-in-law, into some of the most inhospitable land on the face of the planet and does so very well. But, he ends up on the mountain of the lord, this holy place.

While Moses had become very comfortable with his life as a shepherd, the other thing that really stands out as the early part of this story is that Moses isn’t so preoccupied with his work that he simply has his nose to the ground, for this strange site of a bush burning up, captures his attention. If it was me and I was out in western Dakota somewhere in the middle of the summer and a bush was on fire, I don’t think I would simply say “Boy that’s strange, I think I’ll go over and check this out.” I would be going “Ahhhhh, put out the fire, put out the fire!” and I’d be looking for dirt or water or something or a blanket to throw on it, who knows what. But, Moses goes and checks this out and God, noticing Moses’ pause from his routine, from his schedule, from his work, takes note and he calls out to Moses by name and he tells him “Moses, take off your sandals for the ground where you are standing is holy.” Then he heads into this amazing

litany that “I have seen how my people are suffering, that I have heard them beg for my help, that I feel sorry for them, that I have come down to rescue them, that I will bring my people up out of Egypt into a country where this is good land rich with milk and honey and I will give them the land. I have seen how cruel the Egyptians have been to them” and here’s the punch line, “now go, I am sending you.” Moses looks around and he says, “Is there anyone else up there?” He’s been there, he’s done this, and he doesn’t want to do it again.

Remember this is Moses, Prince of Egypt, raised in the house of Pharaoh. There was no one better prepared, no one better educated, nobody better suited to free the Hebrews from Egypt than Moses and he recognized it. I don’t know when it was he found out his true identity, when he had this moment when of national identity and patriotism and sought to free the people and kill the Egyptian and doing it his way didn’t work at all. So, Moses had tried. The passion of his heart was to set his people free but his attempt had failed. In fact, it failed so miserably he had to flee for his life and now here is God saying “I have seen, and I have heard, and I have come and I will bring and so I send....you.”

Hmpf, interesting that God has chosen to depend on us. That God has chosen to depend on us. Cuz’ I don’t think this pattern is true just for Moses, that God was just using Moses, that God had compassion on his people and so he is using Moses. He does it again and again throughout the Bible. He sees the plight of his people and so he calls up judges again and again. He sees the plight of his people and so he brings forward good and godly kings who liberate them. He sees the plight of his people and so he brings up prophets who give them word and the inspiration and the leadership they need. He sees the need of his people and so Jesus when he was here on earth gathered to him this group of disciples that would help him in his work and then continue that work when he was gone, back to his father. As he passed that ministry on to these different Old Testament characters, and then onto his disciples I think he passes it on now to you and I. And God says “I have seen how my people are suffering and I have heard them beg for my help and I have come down to rescue them and I will bring my people out into a good and spacious land, a land flowing of milk and honey. So, I am sending you.” Unhhh, and Moses says “Is anyone else up there?” and we say “Is anyone else up there?” because who are we to represent God? Who are we to be his hands and his feet and his voice? Moses asked the same question. Who am I that I should go to the king, that I should set your people free. God’s answer to Moses is very profound, it’s not about who you are, but about who I am. In fact that phrase “I Am” is repeated more than a dozen times in those few verses and it dominates the entire book of Exodus, this God who is I Am, setting his people free by using mere humans like you and I.

I Am is a fascinating name and we could talk for days just on what that means, but in Hebrew, here is a short bit of what God is saying when he says I Am. In Hebrew, whether verbs are past, present or future tense, really depends on the context. There are no vowels, no special spelling,

there is no special ending to signify what time frame this is set in. So, this I Am, could mean I was, or I am right now, or I will be. Thousands of years of faithful followers have interpreted this correctly. What God really meant is, yes, I am all of those. I am the past, I am the present, I am the future and because I am, you are, because I am, creation is, because I am, there is life. Without me being I Am, there is nothing else. I Am! There is a lot of implication there. But when Moses says “Who am I” and God says “I Am, that’s what’s important”, we start to get a little idea of just how profound it is. Because it’s not about our strength, it’s not about our ability, it’s not about our knowledge or our ability to carry something out, because the one who is asking us to go is “The” I Am and that’s enough. Nothing else is necessary, nothing else is needed, I Am is with us and I Am is asking us to help.

It all starts with Moses turning aside to see this bush that is burning up and so it begs the question, will you and I turn aside? Will we take time from our lives, from our schedules, from our responsibilities, to hear God when he calls, to see where he is saying I have heard and I have seen and I have come to save my people and so, I want to send you.

The irony in this is that Moses had tried once to save the people of Israel in his own strength and in his own way. Now God has come and said, “Moses, I need you to go back and do what you were destined to do, to do what your heart’s desire is, to do where your skills and abilities have their best fit.” So it’s not that God is going to come along and ask us to do something that we are ill-equipped for, it’s not that God will come along and make us do something that our hearts are just not into. No, I think God will use those passions of our hearts, that God will use those skills and abilities. But, God will use our passions and our desires, our skills and our experiences and in fact I think that the invitation, the burning bush, starts there. It’s possible that God will literally talk to you out of a burning bush, but more than likely he will speak to you out of those passions and desires and experiences and in those we need to pause long enough to hear how God wants us to join him in what he is doing or is about to do to save his people, to help his kingdom come on earth, even as it is in heaven. We have to pause and we have to listen and then I think God will invite us to join him in this work that he will use us, even us, to do his will and that in doing so he will give us the desires of our hearts. No reason to panic to shout out “Is there anyone else?”, because God has crafted you, created you, and destined you for a purpose, for a place in his kingdom. So pause long enough to hear the invitation of where he is inviting you. Let’s pray.

Lord, we thank you that you being the God of God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, creator of the universe, the great I Am, would choose to use even us to accomplish your will to do your work. So help us to pause and listen for that invitation where you are asking us to be a part of this kingdom adventure. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.