

Exodus 3:1-15 “Who Am I and Who Are You?”

We’re plugging right along in our series about the origins of Israel. We spent a couple of weeks on Joseph and how the house of Israel came to Egypt. Last week, we started the story of Moses. I’ve said it before, but I want to say it again because I can’t stress enough how important this is. The story of Moses and the Exodus is *the* foundational story for the Jewish faith. In the same way the resurrection of Christ is *our* defining story as Christians, the delivery of God’s people out of slavery from Egypt is the defining story for our Jewish brothers and sisters. Jewish people know the story of Moses, the Exodus, and the receiving of God’s Law. Last week, our story ended with the baby Moses being rescued from the Nile River by Pharaoh’s daughter. From that time on, Moses was raised as a “Prince of Egypt.” Which is a really good movie by the way if you get a chance to see it ... far better than “The Ten Commandments” or “Gods and Kings.” Warning, it’s animated and a musical, but well worth seeing. Anyway, as he grew up in Pharaoh’s house, Moses learned about his Hebrew identity, and became disgusted at how the Hebrew people were being treated. One day he saw a Hebrew slave being brutally punished by an Egyptian overseer, and Moses got so mad he killed the overseer on the spot. Now you’d think this would give all those Hebrew slaves reason to cheer for Moses, but they didn’t. They saw Moses as a troublemaker. So Moses ended up fleeing Egypt, and he wound up in Midian where he settled down, married, had a family and became quite comfortable tending sheep for his father-in-law, the high priest Jethro. God had other plans. That’s where we pick up the story today.

I think this part of the story is about identity. I hear a lot about people having identity issues or going through identity crises. Who am I? Why am I here? What’s my purpose in life? In our scripture reading we heard Moses asking, “Who am I?” And then he asked God, “Who are you? If I’m going to tell people that you have sent me, who will I say has sent me?” And we hear God giving him a vague and ... *odd* answer: “I am who I am.” Who else do you know who identifies as, “I am who I am?”

Popeye the Sailor! God goes on to tell Moses: “Tell them that ‘I AM’ has sent you.” Which of course Moses knows isn’t going to make a bit of sense to anyone. Thus begins this portion of his identity crisis. And let me tell you, he’s the textbook example of somebody with an identity crisis. Here he is ... a man who was raised by a ruling-class Egyptian family but he was also the son of poor Hebrew slaves. He’s at a crossroads in his life now. He’s probably glad that he’s out of Egypt because who knows what would have happened to him if he stayed there. On one hand, he’s a man who is familiar with Egyptian culture and all the privileges that go with it. On the other hand, he’s the descendent of a nomadic people who are comfortable and happy out in the wilderness tending sheep, but who are now slaves in Egypt. I imagine this was a struggle for him. Who is he? An Egyptian? A Hebrew slave? A Medianite? Who knows. But God chose this man ... this one who is both Egyptian and Israelite to deliver God’s people out of slavery.

On the day that Moses encountered God, the text says he had led his flock of sheep “beyond the wilderness,” which is the writer’s way of saying, “out in the middle of nowhere.” So, there he is, beyond the wilderness on Mount Horeb and something strange catches his attention: A small bushfire. One bush in fact. But this one just *keeps* burning and doesn’t get consumed. So what’s going on here? Moses turns aside for a closer look. And as soon as he does, God calls to him out of the fire: “Moses. Moses!” Moses replies, “Here I am!” Remember those first words of Moses. They’ll be significant in a moment. “*Here I am.*” Who? I. Me. I am here. “Come no closer!” says God. “Remove your sandals, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” God continues, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses was so afraid to look that he hid his face. But sure enough, the fire goes on burning, and still the bush is not consumed.

A lot of people over the years have debated about why God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. Here’s the theory that resonates with my soul -- This fire of God burns without consuming or destroying. This says

so many of us think about who and what God is against. “Oh, you mean the God who hates this, or the God who opposes that, or the God who smites and destroys so-and-so.” We just saw an example of this last week. A group of evangelical leaders drafted a doctrinal statement that’s being called The Nashville Statement. “Doctrinal statement” may sound foreign for us as Disciples, because since the beginning we’ve always been a non-doctrinal tradition. Our founders didn’t like doctrinal statements because they almost always divide the church because people have this insane, obsessive desire to define who is “in” and who is “out.” In the case of the Nashville Statement, Gender and Sexual Minorities are in the “out group” according to the church leaders that signed on. That angered me on so many levels. So here you’ve got a group of church leaders who figure that they speak for God, and so they identify themselves, and therefore God, by what they’re against. Not what they or God is *for* ... but what they’re *against*. And we do it too folks! *We* are guilty of this too, because by just brining the subject up, we’re defining ourselves as not like those who signed the Nashville Statement. God’s people have this long history of saying, “We are the people who are against *those* kind of people” (and we have *such* long lists of who “those” kinds of people are.) We define ourselves by what we reject. We are the people who reject that view of the Bible and those who hold it. We are the people who reject those people who have messed up the church. Shoot, we may even entertain fantasies about God *dealing* with them ... *harshly*. “Oh boy, oh boy are they going to get theirs in the end!” But if we take *Jesus* seriously (and I hope we do), and if we take the sign of the *burning bush* seriously, then we may begin to see that we’re getting it all wrong. Jesus wouldn’t even reject or define himself against the ones who were nailing him to the cross! And the presence of God, although it appears to Moses as fire, is a fire that *does not destroy* ... even that which it is burning. Isn’t it interesting that *this* is the way God chose to appear before Moses? A fire that burns, but does not consume.

Anyway, from this fire, God speaks to Moses again saying, “Listen, I’ve heard and seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I’ve heard their cries

as they're being abused by their taskmasters. I know about their suffering and I've come to deliver them from slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey." Now this was surprising news because it was widely assumed that either God was dead or powerless, or that God had rejected the Hebrews and was *against* them. I mean, how else could you explain their slavery? Clearly their God had either failed to keep them out, or had deliberately placed them into slavery. And again here we are looking at God as defined by who God must be against. But God *didn't* abandon the Israelites. God *is* compassionate. God *is* on the side of the downtrodden. And God *is* coming to the rescue. And when God starts a project, God chooses and prepares someone for the task. "Come on Moses. I will send *you* to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." How do you suppose *that* sounded to ol' Moses?

He was not the least bit popular with either the Hebrew slaves *or* the Egyptians. He fled out here to the wilderness to settle down and mind his own business. This didn't sound like a very good idea to him *at all*. And it plunges him right back into his identity crisis. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" "Who am I?" Remember just a minute ago it was "*Here* am I" and now it's "Who am I?" Okay, language and grammar geeks? I've got something fun for you. If you aren't a language geek, hang in there with me. This is still cool. Hebrew literature is all about word play, and the Hebrew language lends itself to some great examples of how you can use words that sound alike to make a point. This whole exchange between Moses and God is a word play on the verb "to be." It doesn't work very well in English because "I am," "You are" and "I will be" don't sound much alike in our language, even though they're all forms of the same verb. Not so in Hebrew. It all sounds *very* similar.

In response to Moses's question, "Who am I?," God replies, "I will be." Same verb again - "I will be with you." And then God gives the rather unhelpful promise that "this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you -- when you've brought the people out of Egypt, you will all meet me here on this mountain to worship." In other words, "You've got to

get all this done and get my people back here before you can see the *real* sign.” Great! So Moses says to God, “But wait, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What’s his name?’ What am I going to say?”

God answers Moses saying, “I AM WHO I AM.” Here we are back at this crazy word play again. “I am who I am.” *Or* ... it might be “I am who I will be,” or “I will be who I am being.” Hebrew verbs aren’t always very specific but that’s kind of cool because Hebrew spirituality and theology isn’t always very specific either. God *might* be *one* of them or *all* of them. That’s the beauty of the Hebrew language and Hebrew theology ... illuminating ambiguity! “So Moses,” God says, “When people ask, just say, ‘I AM sent me to you.’”

This *still* isn’t helping Moses’ identity crisis. Moses is trying to define himself in relationship to God -- “Here I am!” But he figures out that you really can’t do that. The Hebrew language won’t even allow it! You can never find your real identity by starting with yourself and trying to define yourself and then locate yourself in relation to this God. You can’t say, “This is who I am, and this is what God means to me, or this is what place God has in my life.” Because God does *not* occupy *any* place in *your* life at all. *You occupy a place in God’s life.* God’s life and God’s identity always come first, and who *you* are will only ever be found within them. (Mind explodes!) “This is so weird Jesse.” Okay, one more time. Moses is *trying* to say “Here I am,” but God *overrides* that and says “I am” and “I will be,” and the only answer that God gives when Moses asks, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” is “*I will be with you.*” And folks I know this might sound like Forrest Gump and Popeye the Sailor trying to do that old Abbot and Costello “Who’s On First” routine, but what God is trying to say to Moses is, “You are simply the one who is with me.” God is the center ... the one who *is*. We only *are* because God *is*. And as God’s creation, *we* are expressions of who God is and of all that God loves and of all that God is doing. Our true identity is found when we discover that it’s not all about us and *our* likes and dislikes and prejudices. It is about God ... the great I AM.