

Text: Exodus 3: 1-15
Title: Stay Woke
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Roger Allen Nelson

Saint Catherine's Orthodox Monastery is at the base of Mount Sinai. Tradition has it that this ancient cloister sits where Moses saw the burning bush. There's an overgrown old bramble there that's thought to be the offspring of the original unburnt bush. Be prepared to take off your shoes.

But, there is also a stained-glass window depicting the story of our text and every morning when the sun rises, the light streams through and the bush in the window flares up like fire. Reds, oranges, whites, and yellows dance with the new day's glory.

And maybe, dear friends, that stained-glass window and this story serve as beautiful reminders that the glory of God pushes through and illumines this world. In brambles and babies, in campfires and changing seasons, in sunsets and salamanders, God is present. Each day the glory of the Lord is all around and we stand on holy ground....

That's not a bad toehold for this text. And, to tie together the last couple sermons: the "Inscrutable God" and the "In-breaking God" is also the "Immanent God." Thanks be to God.

But, let's sit a little longer with this story.

The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are little more than slave labor for the Egyptians. They're a people without land, without power, and without hope. The brutality of the Egyptian empire is such that Hebrew baby boys are killed to snuff out any hint of hope.

Mercifully, Moses is rescued as a baby and raised by the oppressor....

One day Moses goes to watch his "kinfolk" work. He sees an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew, is incensed by the abuse, and identifies with the injustice. Scripture reads that Moses kills the Egyptian, looks left and right to make sure that there are no witnesses, and then buries the body in the sand. The next day when he intervenes between two Hebrews who are arguing they ask, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?"

When Moses looked both ways he must have missed someone. The word is out that he murdered an Egyptian. That word reaches the Pharaoh and Moses becomes a fugitive on the run. He flees to the land of Midian where he marries, raises a family, and lives happily ever after....

Until, on an ordinary day, as Moses is simply going about his business, the sheep he's tending wander "to the far side of the wilderness" and there he catches a glimpse of a bush engulfed in flames. Curiosity causes him to investigate and God calls to him from out of the burning bush.

Now. Walter Brueggemann writes that this exchange between God and Moses tells us, “everything we need to know about God.”

God sees the misery of his people.

God hears their cries.

God knows their suffering.

God comes to deliver.

God sees.

God hears.

God knows.

God delivers.

Thanks be to God.

That’s great news! Right?

That’s what you want out of God.

When you’re stuck, when life has beat you down, when you’re at the end of your rope, God sees your trouble, God hears your cry, God knows your need, God comes to deliver.

So far, so good....

Except that God chooses to send Moses as the agent of his deliverance. And therefore, by extension, God chooses broken, weak, and flawed people to deliver deliverance. To biblically tease out that theme: God sends liars, swindlers, cowards, adulterers, and murderers to bear his will in this world....

Thanks be to God?

Moses pushes back against God’s call and offers five points of resistance, the first two occur in this morning’s text. Moses asks, “Why me?” and “Who are you?” In turn, God responds with the promise of his presence and the self-disclosure of his name.

Actually, two names. The first is “I AM who I AM.” The second is the tetragrammaton: YHWH, an enigmatic-unpronounceable-series-of-consonants-without-vowels, which usually gets translated as “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” or in our translation, “Lord.”

We could spend hours parsing the importance, implications, and idiosyncrasies of those two names. But, the God who up to this point is only referred to as “God,” or “the God of your Fathers”, or “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” has self-identified.

The inscrutable God reveals God’s self.

The transcendent God breaks in to be known.

The unspeakable God speaks his own name.

Karl Barth, great theologian of the 20th century, wrote that we can only know God to the extent that God wants to be known. And we overstep our bounds when we think otherwise. In Barth’s words:

Our relation to God is ungodly. We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say “God.” We assign to him the highest place in our world; and in so doing we place him fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things... We press ourselves into proximity with him: and so, all unthinking, we make him nigh unto ourselves. We allow ourselves an ordinary communication with him, we permit ourselves to reckon with him

as though this was not extraordinary behavior on our part. We dare to deck ourselves out as his companions, patrons, advisors, and commissioners...

Dear friends, what is easily lost on those who traffic too easily in God-talk is the holy and wholly-other mystery of God....

A God who is beyond every category and every expression of imagination or investigation. A God who can only be known to the extent that God freely chooses to be known. An unknowable God, unless God is self-revelatory.

And here, for the first time in scripture, that God not only sees, hears and responds to the distress of his people, that God not only promises deliverance, but that God offers a name....

And in that, God somehow comes closer, enters in, is in relationship with Moses ~ and therefore with us. God is not just distant unnamed deity. God is not just the covenant maker of tradition. But, God is identifiable. God with a name.

We would rightly take off our shoes....

We would rightly not be too chummy...

Let's circle back to where we began.

Part of what makes this exchange so extraordinary is that the transcendent, eternal God is immanent in a common bramble. A humble shrub bears the fire of divine truth. God reveals his name through the tangled, thorny branches of an insignificant bush. And maybe that's another window into the nature of God.

God chooses that which is lowly, humble, and common to communicate who he is.

God chooses a burning bush, a young woman's womb, a manger among the beasts, a cross among criminals, a cold tomb.

God chooses water, bread, and wine to reveal who he is....

Elizabeth Barret Browning, in a few lines from a larger poem, writes:

*Earth's crammed with Heaven
And every common bush afire with God
Only he who sees, takes off his shoes
The rest sit 'round and pluck blackberries.*

I know that this text is crucial to the unfolding of drama, of salvation history. God will lead Moses to free his people from captivity. The liberation of God's people from enslavement sets the theme for the rest of scripture. And it all starts with a reluctant murderer and a common bush afire with God....

But, can we also claim in this text that "earth's crammed with heaven?" Can we also find footing that God pushes through and illumines this earth? Can we also trust and celebrate that God reveals God's self through common sacramental moments?

African Americans have coined the phrase, “stay woke.” It means to stay alert to injustice and racism and to be informed. For black folks “stay woke” means don’t be complacent, or indifferent, or distracted but remain vigilant.

Dear friends, may we “stay woke” to the immanence of God.

May we stay woke to the ways in which God speaks God’s name.

May we stay woke to the fires that bear the Divine.

May we stay woke to the surprising and common ways in which God reveals his presence.

May we stay woke to the sacramental mystery in which God sees us, hears us, knows and delivers us.

May we stay woke to where and how God would send us.

May we stay woke to the holy and wholly-other mystery of God, the great I AM.

*This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.*

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.