

Third Sunday in Lent – March 24, 2019

Exodus 3:1–8b, 10-15

1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” 5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” 6 Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. 7 The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” 12 And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” 13 Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ “ 15 God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.

It was the 1970’s in California. The San Francisco hippie communities of the 60’s had broken up and moved down the coast to the mountains around Santa Cruz. As they settled down and had families, with their free spirited nature they often chose unusual names for their children. When it came time for school, teachers could never be too surprised at who enrolled—whether it was Moonbeam or Precious Promise, Spring Fever or Time Warp.

That was when the kindergarten teachers first met Fruit Stand. Every fall, according to tradition, parents bravely applied name tags to their children, kissed them good-bye and sent them off to school on the bus. So it was for Fruit Stand. The teachers thought the boy’s name was odd, even for the time, but they tried to make the best of it. “Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?” they offered. And later, “Fruit Stand, how about a snack?” He accepted hesitantly. By the end of the day, his name didn’t seem much more unusual than other’s.

When it was time to go home, the teachers led the children out to the buses. “Fruit Stand, do you know which one is your bus?” He didn’t answer. That wasn’t strange. He hadn’t answered them all day. Lots of children are shy on the first day of school. But it was okay because the teachers had instructed the parents to write the names of their children’s bus stops on the back side of their name tags. The teacher simply turned over the tag. There, neatly printed, was the word “Anthony.” Poor little Anthony had endured quite the first day of school.

We have all heard names that we thought were strange or unusual at one time or another. Then there is our sermon text from Exodus 3. Moses asked God for his name and he replied, “I

AM WHO I AM.” When we think of all the other names we have for God in the bible, even the names of man-made gods in other religions, I AM is right up there as one of the most unusual sounding names. Yet as we study this text we will look at all the characteristics and qualities of God that are revealed in these verses and consider what he does in our lives to see why I AM is an appropriate and fitting name for our God.

When it comes to listing the characteristics and qualities of God, what often comes to mind are those 3 omni- words we may remember from our confirmation classes, the fact that our God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. We see all three here in these verses. Omnipotent is all-powerful, able to do anything with miraculous power. Verse 2: “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.” Anyone can set a bush on fire, but only God could do so without the bush being consumed. This was the attention grabber God used so that in verse 3 Moses would come over and check things out. Omnipresent is all-present, able to be everywhere at once. This came up later in verse 12 as Moses was looking for reassurance God told him, “I will be with you.” No matter where Moses went or what he did, God would be with him. Omniscient is all-knowing, able to see everything in the past, present and future. Even though Moses had been gone from Egypt for forty years, God knew right where he was, tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro (v. 1). He also knew the suffering the Israelites were facing in Egypt (v. 7). Then there was also the sign in verse 12: “And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” God could see ahead and know that Moses would be back on this same mountain, Mt. Sinai, to worship and receive the laws for God’s people.

We see another characteristic in verses 5 & 6 as Moses approached the burning bush: “‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ Then he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.” Here we see God’s holiness. He is perfect and without sin and for a sinful human being to be in his presence is an overwhelming thing. Moses’ reaction would be echoed by Isaiah centuries later as he stood in God’s presence: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (Isa 6:5). Moses was asked to remove his sandals, a sign of respect for being in the presence of the holy and righteous God.

The other characteristics of God we see here are revealed in his names. The first to consider is mentioned four times in our text, in verses 2, 4, 7 and 15, the name, LORD. This specific name is often in our English translations put in all capital letters. This is to distinguish it from another use of Lord, which is used in Scripture to emphasize his role as our Lord and Master. But LORD as it used here is his covenant name, sometimes we render it Yahweh or Jehovah in English. This is a name that emphasizes God’s free and faithful grace. How can Moses, a sinner, stand in God’s holy presence? It is only because of God’s love and mercy, his free and faithful grace. He knows his standards of perfection cannot be met and so he has put into place this covenant, this plan of salvation, his promise that sin will be taken care of by the coming Messiah and Savior. God is more than just a harsh master with exacting standards. He is also the God who wants all people to be saved.

The other name we have here is that unusual one in verse 14, fully named “I AM WHO I AM” and shortened to “I AM.” This name too reveals who God is. The theological term is immutable, but put simply it shows that God is unchanging. He is not I WAS or I WILL BE, he

is simply I AM. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). This name is closely related to the name LORD because in the Hebrew both names use the same four letters. So Old Testament listeners would hear the close connection. Another connection here goes back to verse 6: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Notice what God doesn't say. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead for hundreds of years and yet he did not say "I was their God" but "I am their God." As Jesus would explain, he is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Mt 22:32). He had been their God while they lived here on this earth and still is as they are enjoying his holy presence in heaven.

So what did all this mean for the Israelites? Verses 7 & 8: "The LORD said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'" They had been suffering in Egypt, but now that was going to change. After over four hundred years, God had not changed. The Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation in the land of Canaan and he would keep that promise and bring them up to that good and spacious land.

What did all this mean for Moses? Verse 10: "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." At age eighty, Moses would be starting a new career, one that would not be completed for another forty years. With Moses overwhelmed at task ahead God reminded him that he would be with him (v.12). There would be nothing better for Moses over the years ahead to have the great I AM as his constant companion on this journey.

What does all this mean for us? We will probably never see a burning bush that does not burn up and yet we do stand on holy ground. We do not remove our shoes when we come into church and yet we do come here to be reminded that we stand in the presence of a holy God. As sinful human beings we do not deserve to be anywhere near him and we too should be hiding our faces when we think about all the sinful things we have done and the good things we have left undone. But our God is also the LORD. We are here only by his grace and mercy. He completed his covenant and kept his promise to send a Savior for us so that our sins have been removed and we can stand worthy in his presence. We keep coming back into his presence because we need to be reminded of our sin and his mercy each and every day.

Finally, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who called Moses and delivered the Israelites is our God as well. He is still the great I AM and he has not changed. So when our world questions the role God has to play today or even his existence at all, he is still the I AM who is all-powerful, all-present, all-knowing and is just as relevant and needed for life today as he was four thousand years ago. So when we face temptation or persecution or sickness or anxiety in our lives, he is still the I AM who will be with us as he always has been through our journey in this world. So when we face our final enemy in this life as death threatens to take everything away from us, he is still the I AM who is the God of the living and will take us from this temporary human arrangement to our permanent glorified life in his eternal presence in heaven. I AM WHO I AM. This is our God and he is exactly what we need. Amen.