

Conversations with God: "I Am Who I Am; Who Are You?"  
Genesis 3:1-15 7/1/12

Last week in the engaging story of Jacob's simultaneously wrestling with himself and with God, we saw how this all-night encounter was the pivotal "turning point" in Jacob's life. Speaking in broad brush strokes, we can say that before this event Jacob had defined himself as being selfish, ruthless, and manipulative. During this event Jacob finally opens up and allows God to touch him deeply, so deeply, in fact, that after this encounter Jacob is on the road to becoming a person with real maturity, depth, and wisdom.

Before we connect with today's text, in which we find Moses challenged to "grow up," so to speak, after his own particularly intense confrontation with God, we need to say a few words about Joseph, son of Jacob and his favorite wife, Rachel. Even though Jacob matures considerably after his wrestling match with God, he does not mature to the extent of putting a stop to the dysfunctionality of his family in terms of playing favorites with his children. Most of us remember from Sunday school the cycle of stories about Joseph, Jacob's oft-proclaimed preferred child. We recall Jacob's singling out Joseph with an expensive coat of many colors, how his brothers, enraged with jealousy, throw Joseph into a pit, where he is discovered by a band of Midianites, and sold as a slave in Egypt. Joseph has many adventures in Egypt, ultimately becoming second in command to Pharaoh, and eventually becoming reconciled with his brothers.

The greatest feat which Joseph accomplished was to correctly interpret Pharaoh's dream predicting an upcoming severe famine. Under Joseph's command excess grain was stored for seven years to prepare for the coming seven years of famine. What our Sunday school version of Joseph neglects to mention, but the biblical text itself does not flinch from speaking of, is the fact that it was Joseph himself who made slaves of the Egyptians: the first year of the famine, he takes all their money to buy back their own surplus grain; the next year he proceeds to demand all their livestock. Finally, we come to the fateful verses, Genesis 47:20-21, which tragically inform us: "So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, Joseph made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other." How ironic that Joseph, an Israelite, sets in motion the very process of slavery against the Egyptians that will eventually overwhelm his own people, and turn them into slaves. This is another often overlooked karmic lesson from our own scriptures: we had better watch the negative things we set in motion; they will snowball until their consequences will overwhelm -- if not we ourselves -- future generations derived from us. I will resist the temptation to go off on a riff about our own blatant disregard for global warming and the disastrous karmic consequences we are setting up for our own children and grandchildren.

Returning to scripture, four hundred years have passed from Joseph to Moses. The karmic tables have turned, and now the Israelites are the slaves of the Egyptians. The Egyptians are practicing a form of genocide against the Israelites, Pharaoh

having ordered all newly born male Hebrew infants to be tossed into the river Nile and drowned. We know the story of how Moses' parents place him in a floating basket, how the miniature ark is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, how Moses is brought up as prince in the royal court, how he eventually discovers his Hebrew identity, kills an Egyptian taskmaster he finds brutalizing one of his own Hebrew people, and is forced to flee for his life to the land of Midian -- again a touch of biblical irony, for it was the Midianites who four hundred years earlier sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Moses is now a shepherd, tending his father-in-law's sheep, when he has the life-changing encounter with God described in today's scripture reading. Mt. Horeb is simply another name for Mt. Sinai. It is on the slopes of this mountain that Moses is confronted by God in the form of a bush which burns but is not consumed in its burning. Such a singular sight of course captures Moses' attention. But it also makes a significant theological point. Moses is about to be "set on fire" by God, so to speak, and like the burning bush, Moses will not be consumed in the process. Instead, Moses will be liberated by accepting his God-given vocation, liberated to become, in turn, a liberator.

The haunting lyrics of today's anthem, "blackbird," can apply not only to the broken Moses, but to Moses' broken people, the Hebrews. They can be heard as a profound echo of Moses' healing and the healing of Moses' people: "Blackbird singing in the dead of night take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life you were only waiting for this moment to arise." After God gets Moses' attention, God calls Moses by name.

At this point I would like to introduce a fourth major principle of biblical interpretation. In past sermons we have met the principle of accommodation, where God is understood to condescend to meet people where they are in terms of their own historical, cultural, and personal limitations. We have met the principle of consistency, whereby God's loving and forgiving nature is understood to be absolutely consistent and unchanging; God's nature does not change; it is our human understanding of God's nature that changes. We have met the principle of development, whereby our human understanding of God's nature tends, in spite of occasional giant steps backwards, to mature and to become more profound over time. Today I would like to introduce the principle of personal application, which means that scripture encourages us to apply to ourselves the lessons learned and the vocations embraced by all the major characters described in the Bible. In other words, we are personally invited to become part of the on-going story that the Bible began. So when God calls Moses by name, we are not simply to hear God calling Moses by name, and leave it at that, we are encouraged to hear God calling each of us by name, empowering us as individuals, and empowering us as a church\_for the unique tasks for which God has singled us out.

So as we proceed through the rest of today's biblical narrative, I invite you to hear it on two levels, as addressed to Moses, and as addressed to you. After getting Moses' attention, God identifies Godself, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." This identification is intended to take away any fear on Moses' part, and to remind him that both he and God are standing in continuity with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. I take it

as significant that Joseph is not mentioned in this context, presumably because of his immorality\_in enslaving the Egyptians four hundred years earlier.

God proceeds to share with Moses four truly awesome facts about Godself: God tells Moses, in the context of the misery of the enslaved Hebrews, "I have observed, I have heard, I know, and I have come down." Using the interpretive principle of personal application, we are given permission to apply these awesome character traits of God to our own impossible situations. When we are enslaved by our addictions, chained to our illnesses, caught up in our co-dependencies, mired in relational hassles, we can hear God lovingly communicating to us, I have seen, I have heard, I know, and I have come down. All these realities are implicit in God's summary statement to Moses, "I will be with you." This little preposition with is perhaps the greatest theological word in the vocabulary of Judaism and Christianity. It makes both these great faith traditions intensely personal in terms of their understanding of the relationship between God and people. "I will be with you." Just as God promised to be with Moses in Moses' vocation to take on Pharaoh; God promises to be with Community Church in our vocation to take on, among other things the oppression of homelessness. God promises to be with Community Church in our vocation to welcome and affirm all persons, especially persons who have been exiled to the margins in terms of social status or sexual orientation. God promises to be with Community Church in our vocation to concentrate on the original teachings of Jesus in terms of unceasing compassion, unconditional love, and creative nonviolence. And God promises to be with us, not just as a community, but as individuals within this community; to be with us in all of our personal challenges and struggles, to be with us in all of our triumphs and joys.

It is worth noting that immediately after God tells Moses that God has seen, heard, known, and come down, giving Moses the expectation that God will be the one to take on the Egyptians, God turns the table on Moses and announces to him: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." The first words out of Moses' mouth to this proclamation of God are: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" It is in response to this question that God tells Moses that God will be with him. God's promised presence is not enough for Moses, however, and he tries to get off the hook by complaining that the Israelites will not believe that God is really with him unless God reveals to him God's personal name. At this point God reveals God's famous name to Moses, "I am who I am," which as the Jewish scholar Martin Buber contends is really no revelation at all, but God's definitive rejection of all attempts to use God's name in magical ways; magical ways which were quite prevalent at that time, and, unfortunately still are in our time, as when we christen a nuclear submarine with enough atomic warheads to kill hundreds of millions of people, "Corpus Christi," or "body of Christ." So God -- I believe almost jokingly -- replies to Moses when he asks the divine name he is to reveal to the Israelites: tell them "I am" has sent me to you.

Moses must have been horrified at this joke, knowing what kind of violent response the obtuse statement "I am has sent me to you," would have provoked in the people; he would have been laughed out of town or stoned on the spot. So God, having made

the point that his personal name is not to be messed with -- that God will be who God will be, as some other translations have it -- quickly goes on to give Moses permission to use the well-known name from the past: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'the Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" Amazingly, and perhaps yet another point where we can identify with Moses, is that Moses comes up with three more excuses concerning why he is not the right person for the job. To each of these excuses God promises no magical solution, but merely offers variations on the theme that God will be with him. Like Moses, this is the only response that God will give us to all our objections that we are not the right person or the right church for the job at hand. And yet, when we pause to reflect on it, what an incredible promise God has given us: to be unconditionally, irrevocably with us, both as individuals and as a church.

With this reality of Emmanuel, the name of Jesus meaning -- you guessed it -- "God-with-us," we too can be healed and made whole like the blackbird in this morning's anthem: "Blackbird singing in the dead of night take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life you were only waiting for this moment to arise; you were only waiting for this moment to arise; you were only waiting for this moment to arise."

Amen.

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