

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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I AM WHO I AM

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Exodus 3:1-15

John 14:1-6

As we have been considering the seminal story of how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and made them ready for the promised land, we have been hopping back and forth a good deal within the story. Today, we have come back to near the beginning of the story, to the incident of the burning bush. When God is beginning the work to redeem his people and bring them out of slavery, he calls Moses to lead them. I expect that you have heard the story of the burning bush before: it is an important one in the thinking of our church, and the image of the burning bush is part of the Church of Scotland emblem, along with the words, *Nec tamen consumebatur*, "However, it was not consumed."

Moses has come upon this phenomenal bush when he has driven his father-in-law's sheep further than usual, all the way to mount Horeb – the very mountain where later God will give him the ten commandments. God, speaking from the bush, tells him the he should step out of his shoes because he is on holy ground. If you think about it, that is a strange injunction. You might expect God to say cover your feet, make a barrier, or even stand back a bit, because you are on holy ground, but no. What God does is invite Moses to make contact with holy ground, to remove even the barrier of the soles of his sandals. Holiness is to be embraced, not protected. I leave that thought with you to ponder over what it might mean for you.

And then God speaks and tells Moses what he has heard from the people, with all their suffering, and what he intends to do – or rather, what he intends Moses to do. Moses, you note, is not very keen to do what he is asked. First, he gets humble and says, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" – as if he hadn't already tried, very clumsily, to give his people a help and a lead – and had ended up running away from a charge of murder. (Read chapter 2) "Who am I?" he asks and God answers him, answers, not his question but the fear that lies behind his question – "I will be with you."

But that gives rise to another question, a deeper one: who are you? God has identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the people's ancestors, their family God. But who *is* God? What if they ask God's name?

It's a really good question. The people of Israel at this point had no Scripture and no formal way of worshipping God. They would have stories about God's interactions with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, especially about their being chosen people, maybe. But these stories were four hundred years old now. They didn't know God and they didn't know how or why they should serve, worship or trust. In Egypt, they lived in a culture of many gods, each with statue, place of worship and cult. Which was *their* God? What was God's name? Moses, encountering God, realised that he was being asked to lead a people in the name and the power of a God they did not know and therefore could not trust. They might know a few stories, but in faith terms they were starting at the very beginning.

As I was reading this story, and the reason we are thinking about it together today, I was struck by how similar is the situation to which we are sent. It is similar, but for different reasons. We are asked to go to a people – the people we live among – who do not know God's name. They may, some of them, know stories about God, often in an incomplete and jumbled way; but they don't know God, and don't know God's name.

It is not so much that people are confused by those of other faiths coming to live amongst us. It's not that they are turning to worship God as Allah, or through Buddha or in the pantheon of the Hindu gods. (Although maybe a greater awareness of other ways of approaching the soul's life may have made it easier to move away from any.) It is just that we live in a time when people have moved away from knowledge about God, and so find it much harder, almost impossible, to develop faith.

Moses' insight into the mind-set of his people tells us that this is no new thing. As does the on-going story of God's people beyond the time of Moses. The wandering in the wilderness, especially after they had refused to go up into Canaan, was a time which helped the people to get to know and to trust God. But it didn't last. Under Joshua, they finally took their promised land; but once they had settled down, they lost the focus and locus of their faith. Throughout the turbulent time of the Judges, the repeated refrain is "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." No looking to God, just to what was selfishly best.

There was a coming back to God under David and Solomon, but when the kingdom divided into north and south, they lost the way again. They lost the way and they lost the written law which by now they had had for along time. It was under the good king Hezekiah that the south kingdom found this again and realised how much they had forgotten about God and God's ways.

"If they ask me 'what is his name?' what shall I say to them?" It could have been asked many times.

And the coming of Jesus and the birth of the church did not stop this ebb and flow of knowledge. The same pattern can be seen through the days of the birth and expansion of the early church until Roman emperor Constantine made it the state religion. It can be seen as the Dark Ages gave way to the Middle ages, to the renaissance and then the Reformation. There are times when the knowledge about God is more widespread and times when it is almost lost from the bulk of the people. When it is widespread there is more likely to be faith.

One of the reasons that the church now has to look to reaching out in new ways, to worshipping in new ways, to simply being in new ways, is that we are in a period of ebb. Very often now, if we go to tell of our God to people, they don't know what we mean, or who we mean, by God, beyond the word.

"If I say to them 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me 'what is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

To Moses, God said, "I am who I am." (Or, Hebrew being a different kind of language from English, it could mean "I will be who I will be.") It isn't a name as we think of one, is it? And yet in ancient times a name was chosen first of all because of its meaning, and so it is a name, because it says what is most important about God. It says that God is, and that God will not be further limited by definitions. God is not

going to be named in a way that limits our understanding of him. God is not God of creation... or God of the skies... or God of my people... or God of the just or the good or the faithful. Simply I am who I am. I am who I am and there is always more to discover.

We are not told if the people of Israel ever did ask Moses the question of God's identity, or if they did, what they made of the answer. The answer, like the injunction to remove the shoes on holy ground, is an invitation, an invitation to discover for ourselves who God is as we come closer to God's holiness. And when we go to people who have half-formed, half-remembered ideas about God, we too go with the invitation that they should get to know God for themselves and should get to know God through Jesus. Jesus is the image of God, after all. Jesus is God brought into terms that we can understand. Jesus is what God would look like if – when – God limited himself to being human. In him we can see how God's holiness acts, reacts and interacts.

Jesus made that point himself. He knew that the I Am name of God was a difficult one for people to get their heads around. And so, to help, and also to make sure that people would know that he was in fact God come to them, at different times he made a series of statements about himself using the precursor I Am.

I am the bread of life.

I am the living water.

I am the light of the world.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the vine.

And as we read today, I am the way, the truth and the life.

These are statements, not only about Jesus but about the whole of the Godhead. Jesus knew that most of us humans find it easier to think of things in concrete ways, rather than as abstractions to be applied. This is why he gave us parables and stories and vivid images in his teaching. The I Am statements are pictures Jesus gave us, to help us hang our understanding of God on.

We are called to invite people to know the infinite God for themselves. We can only do this based on what we know of God. So, think about what it might mean for you to remove your shoes and allow yourself to come into closer contact with the holiness of God. That way you will deepen your own knowledge of God, and your faith, from which you can invite others. I am going to be away for the next two Sundays, but when I come back, we will consider the I Am statements of Jesus, to see how they can help us grow in knowledge, in faith and in invitation. Amen.

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