



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

September 3 2017 – “Who Am I?” (Exodus 3:1-15)
 Rev. Jennie Sankey

“Who am I that I should go?” asks Moses. “Who am I?” is a question we’ve all spent some time with. At the beginning of a new school year, children and teenagers are asked to introduce themselves over and over. Same goes for when they show up at youth group next week for kick off. What are your favorite movies? Musical Artists? TV shows? Dessert? If you were an animal, what would you be? When working with other people, we sometimes turn to personality typing. What’s your Myers Briggs type? Your Enneagram number? Your spirit animal? Our church too, is in a time of asking “Who am I?” We just completed our congregational survey which asked us all sorts of questions about our experience of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church. How important is it that we have a great choir program? A hilarious children’s sermon? Do we give enough money? Do we offer a welcoming space? When you join this church as a new member, the first question you are asked it “Who are you?” The answer isn’t a time for you to introduce your family, profession, political views, etc. The answer is the same every time: “I am a child of God and my name is _____.” The question “Who Am I?” cannot be answered by talking about ourselves-the most important part of our identity is answered by who we are with.

Moses is caught in an identity crisis. Last week we heard the story of baby Moses-threatened by the King of Egypt’s decree to kill all Hebrew boys, Moses’ mother and sister prepare a basket and send him down the river, desperate for his life. The daughter of Pharaoh finds him, names him, and adopts him as her own. Today we read the story of how God called Moses to free God’s people from slavery through the familiar story of the burning bush. But there’s some other important details in between these stories that shouldn’t be left out. Did Moses know his people, including his immediate biological family was enslaved right outside his front door? What we do know is that after he had grown up, he awoke to this knowledge, and one day, seeing an Egyptian beating an Israelite, one of his kinsfolk, he kills the Egyptian and buries him in the sand. He thinks no one has seen, but soon finds out that his actions are known to the Israelites and the Egyptians. He runs away, disowned by his Egyptian family as a murderer, and rejected by his biological family as an Egyptian. Out into the wilderness he goes, finding shelter in Midian as a shepherd. He marries Zipporah, naming their son “Gershom,” which means “alien,” because,

“I have been an alien residing in a foreign land. Who is Moses? He’s not so sure. At the beginning of this story we find Moses literally wandering with his flock “beyond the wilderness.” It is in this wilderness of confusion that he comes face to face with God.

Noticing a bush burning, but not being consumed or burnt up, Moses “turns aside” to see what’s going on. God sees Moses and calls to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” If Moses was looking for a sign, this sure was something. God commands Moses to take off his sandals because he is on holy ground. God announces, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” That’s when Moses gets scared. God has been made known in flames that don’t burn and a voice that comes from a bush, like nothing he’s seen before. As realistic as I’m sure the burning bush I brought to worship is, Moses’ experience seemed a bit more overwhelming.

Listen and see if you can guess what overwhelming event this audio clip is from: Radiolab clip 2.25-2.55: <https://www.wnyc.org/radio/#/ondemand/790298>

You may have guessed that this is from the total eclipse on August 21. I think this is one of those times when yelling “oh my God” is not taking the Lord’s name, but attributing credit where credit’s due. Adults and children alike shouted, cried, cheered and gaped as a black circle moved in front of the sun, leaving the flaming corona around the edge. The sky darkened, the crickets chirped, the birds were silent, and the colors around those viewing were like nothing they had experienced before. Just as Moses was compelled to go and see this burning bush, thousands across our country were drawn to the path of totality, some of us traveling “beyond the wilderness” of the cities we’re from to turn aside and see this great sight. And in those short minutes of totality, while my shoes didn’t come off, I was in awe. Looking around at a landscape that had changed so quickly and drastically, I felt like the breath had been knocked out of me as feelings of wonder, fear and smallness washed over me. In that moment, God was made known to many watching.

Now that Moses has had his own OMG moment, he learns that God wants him to be the one to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses isn’t so sure. “Who am I?” he asks. Now if you’re gonna ask anyone to tell you who you are, it seems like our creator and Lord God would be the one to know. But God doesn’t give him any valuable insight from a personality test. God said, “I will be with you.” Hear that again. Moses asks, “Who am I?” and God replies, “I will be with you.” At first look, that may not seem like a very helpful answer. But I think it’s the only response that makes sense for Moses. Who am I? God is

with me. I am the one whom God is with. But this leads us to another question. If Moses is the one God is with, who is God?

So, he asks, *“If I come to the Israelites and 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?”* And in the translation we read today, God answers, “I Am Who I Am. Tell the Israelites ‘I Am’ sent me.” One of my former Columbia Seminary professors, Dr. Brennan Breed says that something gets lost in this translation. Dr. Breed says that a better translation is “I will be whatever I will be.” Who is God? Not static or stable. Not understood or controlled. God is whatever God will be. And God has chosen to be with Moses.

God went with Moses to show spectacular signs of God-plagues, pillars of cloud and fire, parting seas, bread from heaven-but also to be with Moses as he dealt with arguments, disbelief, lack of food and water, and how to live as God’s people, even when wandering in the wilderness. Moses was chosen to make God known to a suffering people with his shepherds staff and God’s holy presence.

Who are we? We may not get a burning bush. God’s voice did not speak to me from behind the eclipse. But wherever we go, we are promised God will be with us. We are the ones God is with. God has chosen us to go out and make God known. And we will not go alone. The answer to “who am I,” for all of us is found in our relationship with God. God will be whatever God will be. God chooses us to be with and calls us to turn aside to show others what it looks like to live with God. God comes to us when we are wandering to send us out, like Moses. And God will go with us as we go forward with purpose, ready to share the brightness of the burning bush in the darkest situations.

Moses looked at himself and saw someone lost and confused. An Israelite son and brother whose people was enslaved. An Egyptian raised oppressor whose family who enslaved his mother, father, sister and brother. A murderer whose anger got the better of him. A shepherd wandering beyond the wilderness. A man who hesitated at the instructions of God. God looked at him and saw the person who would bring God’s people out of slavery. Someone who will never be alone. The one who God is with. A child of God.

We look at ourselves and see things like our upbringing, life experience, appearance, family, careers, and personality types. These things matter, because they affect the way we engage with the world around us, and how we are perceived. Moses’ dual Egyptian/Hebrew identity served him well as he dealt with both persuading Pharaoh and gaining the Israelite’s trust. His experience as a shepherd surely served him well as he led God’s people through the wilderness. Your background leads you to the

contexts you might best serve and people who will walk with. But it's only with God that anything happens-God brings the burning bush; we get to point it out, listen for the call, ask questions, and go make God known.

God will be with us this year as we send Dave off into retirement, welcome an interim pastor, and begin our search for a new pastor to join us in ministry here. This is a time in our church life when we are asking "who am I?" and soon will be spending a little time wandering in in an unknown place without the leadership of Dave Fry. But over what any survey says, or demographic study shows, we can claim the knowledge that we are God's children, and continue to burn brightly to make God known in this community through our mission and outreach, education, worship, fellowship and care for each other.

God is with those suffering in the wake of hurricane Harvey or tropical storms in Southeast Asia.

Without homes to return to many are asking "who am I?" We've seen incredible stories of strangers rescuing each other on the news, and may feel distant in our reach to help. This morning our HS Church School class talked about ways God might be sending them to respond; maybe through money or supplies, definitely through prayer, and perhaps through organization of the rest of us. God will be made known in our response as we turn aside to serve those suffering in this world, following the lead of the bright young leaders of this church.

Who Am I? I am the one God is with. I am a child of God. Today, we can see a burning bush of our own right here at the Lord's table. This is a place where God is made known in the bread and cup. It is a place where we are reminded that God is with us in a simple meal of bread and wine. We are sent from the table by the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission in the world. So today at least, we can point to the table as a burning bush, where we can turn aside to be awestruck by the love of God and leave knowing that we do not leave alone.

We may not get a burning bush moment in the way Moses did. I may not ever see the glory of a total eclipse again. But that doesn't excuse us from the truth this story brings us. God chooses to call us, with all our history, inadequacies, hesitations, and fears. God chooses to call us to make God's self known to others. We can burn brightly with God's love, compassion, and justice and not be consumed. We can be faithful to God's call in our lives even when we are full of questions and apprehension. God, I Am Who I Am, I Will be Who I Will be, is made known when we live knowing who we are-the one who God is with.