

I AM

Proper 17A- Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c;
Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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*In the name of our God who is Life Abundant, Love
Overflowing, and Spirit Outpouring, Amen.*

Last week, our family was away for a few days at one of our favorite places- Delaware Seashore State Park. I am a Jersey girl who grew up going “down the shore” and I love everything about it, but there is something about where the water meets the shoreline that is very special to me. The ocean is an ancient place, timeless, the birthplace of all life on this planet, its waves eternally approaching and retreating since long before any human being gazed upon them- a liminal space where it seems completely natural to feel close to God. At sunset, when the ocean is a silvery shimmer and the sky deepens through the luminous colors of sunset towards darkness, or in the

early morning, when the rising sun drenches the sky and the dancing surf with radiance, I sense God is particularly near. I find that I do not need any words for how completely my sense of the beauty of creation, of God's creating presence fills every part of my being. *There are, after all, some things so holy, so full of wonder, so overwhelmingly powerful, that we cannot put them into words.*

And yet as human beings words matter to us. We use words to say important things about ourselves and they help us describe our own experiences of God. The words in our scripture stories have one overarching purpose- *they help us name and claim the endlessly loving ways God is and has always been present and acting on behalf of God's people.* They tell us that in the beginning, God's Spirit moved over the waters, over the chaos of pre-creation, and called all things into being- light and darkness, sky and land, all living creatures. When the

human beings God created make choices that drive them far from this place where all lived in harmony, God continues to call them back into relationship, the fullness of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustaining Spirit teaching generation after generation that all brokenness can end and God is always waiting, always longing to welcome God's people home. Over the last few weeks of lectionary readings, we knew God's presence when a voice on a mountaintop proclaims Jesus God's beloved Son and we are changed forever by the radiance of God's nearness; when Jesus stretches out a hand across stormy waters and rescues us when we are sinking; when we cry out to God for healing, willing to settle even for crumbs and suddenly the whole kingdom is ours for the taking; when we claim Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of the living God, and stand on the threshold of this new holy community that these words will help us build; when we realize that discipleship means we each will carry a cross that is ours and no one else's- and even then our calling as

cross-bearers is to point not to ourselves, *but to all God was and is and will always be.*

The tellers of these stories deliberately use a variety of different names for God and how these names are chosen carries significant meaning. Some of them are generic names that mean “a deity”, or “god” with a lower case ‘g’, while the Hebrew word “Elohim” comes to mean “the one true God”, the God of the Israelites, separating this God out from all other gods. It is first used when it is Elohim who speaks the world into existence, and as this name is used for God in specific stories it comes to stand for the fullness of divine power and might. Names express a truth of identity- in a powerful sense a name is the expression of an inner reality, or at least our hopes for this reality. We name our children after family members with the prayer that they will be blessed with the gifts and character of that beloved person, or choose a name that has a particularly powerful meaning, such as “Moses”,

which means “I drew him out of the water.” And hearing or saying someone’s name immediately reminds us of the many things that person is to us- “There goes my friend Bob!” we might say, and we fondly recall that Bob has run the corner grocery store for thirty years, that he always gives the children a popsicle on hot days, that he has a kind and gentle soul- although a name can never describe all that any of us are or long to be.

In today’s reading from Exodus, Moses hears God say God’s name **out loud for the very first time** –not a name we give God, *but **THE** Name that God gives to God’s self*. Moses is tending the flocks when God appears to him and gets his attention through an astonishing sight, a bush on fire but not burning up, and tells Moses not his name, but WHO he is: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob”, calling Moses to be the long prayed-for

deliverer of the Israelite people enslaved in Egypt under Pharaoh. When Moses pushes God for more information, saying “if they ask me ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God answers Moses with a name that seems to raise more questions than answers: **“I AM WHO I AM.”** And then God continues: **“Tell them I AM has sent me to you. Say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”** Because the name **I AM** is how God chooses to introduce God’s self, it becomes so sacred that in Judaism the name is never said aloud or even fully spelled out- the word ‘adonai’, or ‘LORD’ in all capital letters, is used instead.

Preachers so often craft their sermons around the day’s Gospel reading, on the life and death and

teachings of Jesus. But I landed here this week- on God telling Moses God's name and why this matters *because this is an incredible moment-* one that will gather and shape God's people not only in this moment but in all the ages to come. This self-given Name of God contains all that God is and has ever been to God's people, and everything about how we are to relate to God. This name is linked inseparably with the relationship so God longs for with us: this is a Divine Being that promises to be present forever with ordinary human beings, present and active in both hardship and joy. This is the God that our ancestors worshipped, but there is also something new: this God promises intervention on the part of God's people in their struggles and, through the exodus event, is intimately connected with salvation and blessing, with deliverance from suffering and oppression, with liberation and fullness of life in the endlessly abundant love of God. As God tells Moses: **"I have observed**

the misery of my people; I have heard their cry; indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from that land of bondage to a land overflowing with good things. I AM the One who was present to those who came before you and I have not forgotten my people, and I will rescue and deliver them and bring them to a place of safety, of blessing, of wholeness. I AM the One who will do this-I AM WHO I AM.”

And because we know that this is where these stories always lead us, we remember that **I AM WHO I AM** is our God also. **Beloveds, this is really important.** What God’s name defines God to be is also how we are to experience God, and as we live into this truth we point back always to the God who has loved us from the beginning. All wholeness of life comes from this place. Here, I think, is our connection

with the beauty of the ocean at dawn and the sureness of God's presence in the world around us: *our naming of all God is to us is beyond anything we can try and pin down with our human language, far beyond the limits of human understanding, something we can only know in the depths of our souls.* God names God's self **I AM** to say: "I am present in all things that have ever been or will ever be- in your connection with the wisdom and the struggles of those who have gone before you- in the healing and reconciliation your souls and bodies so desperately seek-in the crosses you take up that can feel so unbearably heavy- in your confusion and misunderstanding that leads you to deny me- in my invitation to always return to me no matter how far you have wandered away. I am and have always been your God- claim the fullness of my promises to you and I will deliver you and bring you safely home. *Amen.*

