Enraged, Moses killed the slave master and fled Egypt. Now, Moses is on the run, a wanted man, hiding in the desert. Egypt is the last place Moses wants to go, yet to Egypt is exactly where God now asks Moses to go. What is more, God asks Moses to stand before Pharaoh, the world’s mightiest monarch, a powerful king who holds Moses’ life in his hand.

Moses is understandably cautious, so he asks God for some clarity: “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” (3:11). Moses is a lowly shepherd, a condemned murderer. He has no earthly right to stand before Pharaoh. Moses questions why God would send him to the mightiest ruler in the world.

God’s answer to Moses offers little clarity. “I will be with you,” says God (3:12a). Just what does that mean? Will God show up, in person, and scare Pharaoh out of his wits? Will God be with Moses “in spirit”? There is much ambiguity in God’s answer.

But consider what God says next: “*when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain*” (3:12b). It is not “if” Moses brings the people out, but “when” he brings them out. In other words, what God wills, will happen! God is so sure that Moses can do this – with God’s help – that God speaks as though it has already come to pass.

But Moses is not yet convinced. He seeks even more clarity before he commits. “*If they ask me, ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?*” (3:13). Moses wants to identify this God who asks him to go to Pharaoh and liberate a people. Moses is familiar with the Egyptian gods, Ra and Anubis. He knows the names of the Canaanite gods, Baal and Asheroth. But Moses does not know this God; he wants a name that the people will recognize and believe.

Again, God’s answer is ambiguous: “*I AM who I AM. Tell them I AM has sent me to you*” (3:14). Wait, what? Your name is “I AM”? What kind of name is that?

To understand the power and weight of this name, compare this answer to the Egyptian pantheon. The Egyptians dedicated temples to deities with faces, bodies, birth stories, and death stories. Most significantly, these gods had names and power over certain aspects of life. For example, the goddess Isis had dominion over women, children, and medicine. Her name identified her with specific characteristics, and she held sway only over a few elements of life. Not so for the God of Israel.

When God gives a name for the people to use, it conveys God’s dominion over all things. It names God as the creative power behind the universe. It speaks to God’s eternal nature: I AM. God is the self-sufficient, self-sustaining God who was, who is, and who will be.

This response set God apart from all the foreign gods the people may have known. Israel’s God is not limited to a name or a territory. Israel’s God is not created by human hands or named by human language. The statement “I AM” comes from the Hebrew verb “to be or to exist.” With this statement, God declared that God is self-existent, self-sufficient, self-directed, eternal, and unchanging.

But this name also declared God’s presence. Other deities are distant entities, aloof and indifferent to humankind. Israel’s God is different because Israel’s God is fully present with God’s people, Israel. God is aware of their suffering. God desires to deliver them, and God intends to be known throughout all generations (3:7-15).

Revealing God’s holy name to Moses implied an intimate relationship, as first names were only shared with those in covenant relationship. This God is present and would always be present with God’s people, ready to intervene on their behalf. By giving this name, “I AM,” God is asking Moses to trust that God will be present, to trust that God’s work will be accomplished, and to trust that by God’s power and in God’s good time God’s people will be freed. God’s answers are exasperatingly unclear, but that’s really the point: it is not for us to know God’s thoughts or timetable; it is for us to trust that God is working to fulfill God’s good purpose.

An encounter with God demands a response and requires our entire lives. I doubt that God’s answers reassured Moses, but we know that he did as God commanded. Moses went to Egypt, he stood before Pharaoh, he demanded liberty for God’s people, and with God’s help Moses led them to freedom where they worshiped God on the mountain as God directed.

Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush had nothing to do with gaining clarity, and everything to do with gaining conviction. It is about trusting that God has a plan and God will bring that plan to a successful completion.

If you are at all like me, you are probably seeking for clarity these days. How long will the pandemic last? Is it safe to send our kids back to school? When will I be able to go out in public without wearing a mask? Will there be a Covid-19 vaccine anytime soon? These are questions without good answers. The clarity we seek may be standing in the way of our trusting God.

God asks us to trust that God is still in charge, still handling things, still working out God’s plan even when we don’t understand what is happening. God asks us to trust Robert Browning’s famous phase: “God is in his universe; all is right with the world!” God, the great I AM, is alive and well and working things out. God promised, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). For Christians seeking clarity, the first step is letting go and trusting God.

Sources:

* Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust*. “Clarity vs. Trust.” <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-2/sermon-illustrations-trust/> Retrieved from *The Pastor’s Workshop* onAugust 24, 2020.
* “What is the meaning of ‘I AM Who I AM’ in Exodus 3:14?” <https://www.compellingtruth.org/I-AM-WHO-I-AM-Exodus-3-14.html>. Retrieved August 24, 2020.

**For Christians Seeking Clarity**

Sunday, August 30, 2020 Exodus 3:1-15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When John Kavanaugh, who was a noted and famous ethicist, went to Calcutta, he was seeking Mother Teresa…and more. He went for three months to work at the house of the dying to find out how best he could spend the rest of his life.

When he met Mother Teresa, he asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she replied. He then uttered the request he had carried thousands of miles: “Clarity. Pray that I have clarity.”

“No,” Mother Teresa answered, “I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh said that she always seemed to have clarity, the very kind of clarity he was looking for, Mother Teresa laughed and said: “I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So, I will pray that you trust God.”

In our text today, Moses is seeking clarity. He is out in the desert watching his father-in-law’s sheep when he stumbles upon a burning bush. The bush is on fire, but it is not consumed, which is decidedly strange. Then, out of the bush, Moses hears a voice, God’s voice. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God of Moses’ ancestors. But Moses does not know this God. Not yet.

God says to Moses, “*The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt*” (3:9-10). This is where Moses needs some clarity.

But first, some context. Moses is a Hebrew by birth. His mother saved Moses’ life by floating him down the Nile River in a basket when Pharaoh’s men killed the Hebrew boys. Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses and raised him as an Egyptian. One day, Moses saw an Egyptian slave master beating a Hebrew slave.