

“Be (Being)”

Exodus 3:1-14

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”

And the voice said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

And the voice said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.

Indeed, I know their sufferings,
and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians,
and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land,
a land flowing with milk and honey.

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

He said, “I will be with you;
and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you:
when you have brought the people out of Egypt,
you shall worship God on this mountain.”

But Moses said to God, “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?”

God said to Moses, “I am Who I Am.”

“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘**I Am** has sent me to you.’”

“Be (Being)”

Exodus 3:1-15

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I.

I am not sure if what I am about to say will come as good news to you, or bad. It is what it is, though, and about this there can be no dispute. Curiously, though, there is seldom a moment when it is not being disputed.

I have performed a lot of weddings in my day. Yesterday I presided at the nuptials of our own Jim Durham and Patti LaRock (CONGRATULATIONS!!!). Of the one-hundred and forty-two marriage ceremonies I have officiated to date this might be among my all time favorite (other than my own, *of course*). I do a good wedding, with the right mix of humor and solemnity. With the exception of the one where the groom was currently married to someone in *addition* to the bride to whom I had just married him (boy, did I get an earful from the mother of the “new” bride) everyone of these “hitchings” went off without a hitch (more or less).

II.

I have officiated at weddings in backyards, mountain tops, parks, beaches, chapels, and churches all over the country. I even performed a wedding once while standing in a stream with the bride and groom wearing homemade buckskin outfits who rode off together on horseback after the ceremony. I have seen grooms sweat profusely, giggle nervously, freeze-up, nearly faint, cry like babies, and be so overwhelmed the words keep catching in their throat as they struggled to say their vows. I have met brides who have humbled me with their goodness, were unabashedly earnest in their devotion, radiant with joy, delighted by the day they had so long imagined, wide and teary eyed, and each has been simply beautiful in their own way. (I’ve also met one or two “bridezillas” along the way, but we won’t go there.)

III.

There have also been proud and none-too-relieved parents, dear friends, supportive families, jovial groomsmen (this in spite of their rental shoes being too tight) and bridesmaids all decked out in satin, chiffon and taffeta who were

more than glad to be wearing a dress they will probably never wear again. I am sure each of you have been to your own fair share of weddings and, perhaps, have your own lovely, wonderful, humorous, or wickedly weird stories. And, who among us has not heard I Corinthians 13:1-3 being read on many of those occasions? It is a tremendous passage; eloquent, poignant and wise: *“Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not insist on its own way. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

IV.

The truth is, though, I can't recall even one time I based my wedding homily on this remarkable passage. Instead, my go-to favorite is today's scripture reading from Exodus 3:1-14; the story of God appearing to Moses out of a burning bush commanding him to go to Pharaoh and to bring God's people out of captivity in Egypt. An odd choice, I will admit; but it works (you'll see!). I always tell the bride and groom there are three people most prone to messing up their wedding. The first is the photographer or videographer who is overly intrusive (try to strike a balance between recording the wedding and enjoying the wedding), the DJ or band (if you don't want the bunny-hop at the reception tell them so) and, of course, the clergy person or magistrate who performs the service (hard to control, I admit). In this regard, I always try to assure the couple I will not be the weak link.

V.

Which, I am sure, they come to doubt when I pull out the toothpaste. Yes, *toothpaste* is the key to a good and happy marriage. I then go on to relate my own experience at having confronted the disconcerting realization that I had married a “middle squeezer” when I, myself, am a “bottom roller.” The solution to this conundrum is to simply purchase *two* tubes of toothpaste. Such a metaphor goes a long way to ensuring marital bliss and, of course, good dental hygiene (which, as our resident dentist, Dr. Keli Hollis, will tell you is so *very* important). I use the toothpaste analogy to segue to that frightful moment (which most assuredly will come at some point, eventually) when they are lying in bed at night right next to each other and think to themselves after some incident or experience, *“Who IS this person I married?!?”*

VI.

Whenever two people get married, inevitably they believe they are marrying *one* person, but eventually discover they've married someone *completely* different from the person they *thought* they intended to marry. Such a moment, and countless others like it that will follow, represents a make-it or break-it fork in the road. The solution, I tell the bride and groom, and the secret to a happy and healthy marriage is to allow the other person to be who they will BE. Which brings us right back to Moses, the burning bush, and, of course, the toothpaste.

This passage from Exodus 3 is one of the few instances (probably the only one, actually) where I am glad I took Hebrew in seminary. After God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand of him that he let God's people go, Moses rightly says to God, "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? And when the Israelites ask, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?*" God answers by saying, "*I am Who I Am.*" "*Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'*"

VII.

A very clever response, certainly. However, this is the English translation of the Hebrew אֲנִי הָאֵל (remember, read it right to left) or, "*I am Who I Am*"; which, while accurate, is not necessarily complete. Though slightly awkward in the English, and why it is translated the other way, a fuller translation would be, "*I am being Who I Am Being. I am Being has sent me to you.*" The difference between the translations, which may seem subtle at first glance, is that "*I Am*" is static and fixed, while "*I am Being*" is fluid and in flux. For the married couple lying in bed at night, it isn't that a mistake has been made or that they've misjudged the other. Rather, it is the case that their partner changed and, more importantly, will *continue* to change. They simply are being who they are being. The larger ramification for this passage, beyond the marriage dynamic, is two-fold.

VIII.

First, we must resist trying to put God in a box. Though the question Moses puts to God is logical and innocent enough, "*What is your name?*" it serves to make God play by our human rules, and exist within our (very) limited conceptual framework. God is not having any of that, however. Not only will God not be pinned down by one particular name (that is to say whatever and whomever God chooses to Be at just one moment) this is only

one small part of what God will be *Being* in the millions of ensuing moments stretching forward in time (and, probably, backwards in time as well; but we won't get into that here, either). In our faith journey, we certainly should try to understand God to whatever extent we are able; so long as we realize that such an understanding doesn't extend very far at all. God is Being who God will be Being.

IX.

Second, and perhaps a little closer to home, just as God is Being who God is being so, too, our lives aren't just what they are, they are being what they will be being. Or, in the immortal words of the chanteuse Doris Day, *Que Sera, Sera*; whatever will be (being) will be (being). The acceptance of this, my friends, is the real challenge of the life of faith.

Basically, there are only two kinds of problems in this world: those we can do something about (commonly when one is younger) and those about which we cannot do anything (especially as one gets older). In either scenario, however, one thing is absolute: whatever will be (being) will be (being). As I stated at the beginning of the sermon, I am not sure if this comes as good news to you, or bad. It is what it is, though, and about this there can be no dispute. Yet, there seldom isn't; a dispute, that is.

X.

As the crown of creation endowed with so many gifts and talents, it is in our nature as human beings to deny, negotiate, bargain, ignore, obfuscate, bury, camouflage, resist, rebel, wish-away, and dispute whatever is being what is being that which we don't like, don't want, or simply cannot endure. And that is ok. At least at the start; and this is where each and everyone of us *has* to start. It is a journey, though. Every such journey is always composed of three stages corresponding to the story of the Israelites which serves as an exquisite metaphor: captivity, journey through the wilderness and, finally, the promised land flowing with milk and honey, good and broad. At some point in my wedding homily based on this passage, I always tell the couple that their marriage is the sacred ground on which they stand, or can choose to stand upon. In the same way, our faith is the sacred ground upon which each of us can choose to stand, or not.

XI.

Such ground isn't just one particular or specific patch, but wherever grace finds us: be it in times of captivity (problems we can control or, especially, those we cannot) during our wandering as we move through the wilderness (which can be a short jaunt or for 40 years) or, finally, when we arrive at a place of acceptance (a good and broad land flowing with milk and honey). Fair warning, though, it is often a very slow and dauntingly arduous process; and sometimes we can exist, to varying degrees, in each of these three stages simultaneously. All of that said, however, there is a difference between the forced tribute of acquiescence demanded of us by others or by circumstances, and the gift of acceptance we can choose to offer to ourselves.

XII.

As we look around our world these days, there is much that we *wish* we could change and there is much which *needs* to change. However, I would like to suggest this morning that there are those things we *can* and *should* do something about, especially while we have the ability, opportunity, and responsibility to do so. There are also those things we cannot change or will never change in the way or at the pace we so earnestly desire, rightly or wrongly. Sometimes, it is a very fine line which separates the two and it can be exceedingly difficult to discern if the line is fixed or fluid.

At the very least, however, acceptance is either the requisite *first* step in naming the truth of those things we *can* change, or the one and *only* step we can take towards being able to abide those things we *can't* change. Whatever will be (being) will be (being) either for this present moment or for the balance of the all the moments yet to come.

XIII.

Finally, in returning to this morning's scripture passage and the larger story of the Israelites and their liberation from captivity, sojourn through the wilderness, and arrival in the promised land, we should appreciate that allowing God and our lives to be what they are being is made infinitely easier and ultimately possible when we do so in the company of others. Perhaps the greatest joy which is to be found in marriage is the gift of walking through this world with another. The wedding day it isn't just a celebration of the love that has *been* found, but what love will *become* such as to carry the couple, and their family, forward through this life; not as individuals alone, but together with one another.

XIV.

In the same way (though, perhaps, without all the fanfare and glitter) simply coming together as the children of God to worship, and to share our lives in a faith community, is a celebration not just of the love which has *been* found in Christ, but what such love will *yet become*...in us...and in our world *through* Christ. God's love that will be (being) what God's grace will be (being).

Love is being patient, love is being kind.

Love does is not insisting on our own way.

*Love is bearing all things, believing all things,
hoping all things, enduring all things.*

Love never stops...being...love.

Amen.