

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 1, 2023

So our kids are going to a new space this morning for a couple different reasons, but a really exciting one for our choir is that soon and very soon, after three years of having no air conditioning and no heat in their choir practicing space, soon and very soon, they'll have that, which means that we have to just move Worship and Wonder for a while. But it's also because the children's ministry is growing, and we need all the space we can, so we invite you– if you don't spend too much time in the Jones building, you can go over to the third floor. What used to be known as simply the Youth Wing is now the Children's Wing, and our youth have moved over into the CAFE House, which we mentioned last week to you. Some wonderful growth and expansion here, so we always want to mark that and be grateful to God for...for what's happening here. In just a moment I'm going to read from Exodus 3. This is an important text that we already got a preview of from Pastor Courtney. It's an interaction between Moses and God. A bit of context for you, though– the scene just before the scene that we'll read is the that of Moses interacting with the burning bush, so this voice that you'll hear beginning in the seventh verse of the third chapter of Exodus is the voice of God, that is coming from a bush that is consumed in flame, but not being consumed by those flames. This is a...a really mystical, mysterious interaction with God and Moses, and it's also one that I think, I hope, we might be able to interact with as well. This is the Calling of Moses. Before we read that text together, we will go to God in prayer so let's pray.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us. Meet us exactly where we are this morning, Lord, and quiet us that we might hear your voice for us. As we hear your voice, as we hear your word, may it change us, and may it call us to live in a new way in your world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, Our Rock and Our Redeemer.

Amen.

Exodus 3:7-15

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 spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, I am sending 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?' And God 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 serve 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 God's name?" what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." God said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the

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God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”:

This is my name for ever,
and this is my title for all generations.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So the story of Moses happens in some really interesting chapters. We are here at a hinge point in Moses's life, when he is called by God to be the Liberator of the Israelites from Egypt. But much water has gone under the bridge in Moses's story before we get to this part of Exodus. Moses is born into a time of political transition—an inflection point if you will—when things are in upheaval. There's a xenophobic decree put out by the Pharaoh that endangers and actually leads to the death of many, many, many children, endangers Moses's life as well. He is saved by brave women, some poor, some privileged; and then over time Moses is called by God to this particular work. This story, though, of Moses, it gets started with folks from different socioeconomic classes all working together, from different histories, with different familial stories, all working together to bring about the life of this one that we'll call Moses. And then Moses is walking down the road one day, and there's a bush burning in front of him. Flames that he can see but somehow do not consume this bush. And then the voice of God begins to speak from that bush, calling to Moses, calling to him to do something that nobody would want to do on their own. God's call to Moses first begins by saying, God says, “I've heard the cries of my people.” And this is really important—Egypt is a place of oppression, yes, it is a place where the Israelites are being oppressed, where they are being trampled all the day long. It's also a place where the Egyptians themselves are being oppressed too. It's a place of commerce. It's a...it's something where there's oppression that is very visible; and then there's a whole lot of other oppression that you might not be able to see, but it is still there. God hears the cries of the Israelites, and so he decides their liberation needs to happen. But the work of liberation in this text, as it is in the world, is not simply the work of God. Liberation does not just divinely happen by happenstance. There are agents of God in the world that work this liberation, that claim it for God's people; and Moses is privileged to be one of those people to liberate the Israelites. But Moses knows that if he goes and describes this scene that we have just read from Exodus, nobody is going to believe him. “Y'all, here's the thing. I know you're not going to understand this, but I was walking down the road and there was this bush, and it, like, lit on fire, and then it began to speak to me.” And they will, they will try to figure out for Moses what he has, what has led him to hallucinate in such a way, okay. And he knows that this will be difficult for people to hear, so Moses says, “Listen, when I go to them, and I tell them that the God of all creation has said that I'm supposed to liberate them, they're going to ask me who it is that sent me. So tell me your name.” If you were here last week, we had the same question asked by Jacob of the wrestler, the Divine wrestler in the middle of the night, and when Jacob says “Tell me your name,” the Divine wrestler says, “Why do you ask my name?” And then skipping the question entirely, blesses Jacob, and he goes on his way. As we mentioned last week, for the Israelites and ultimately for the Jewish people, to...to name something is to

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claim it. It is to understand it. It is to comprehend it, and so no one gets to speak the name of God. And then from the bush the Divine says, "I am who I am," or as Courtnay rightly points out, "I will be who I will be." Moses has everything he needs to liberate the people. It turns out he simply must know that God is present and God is in the future to which he will be leading the Israelites. It's that simple actually. In order to be liberated we must know that the God of all creation is present here in this particular moment and also will be in the place to which we are going. This liberation will be divine, but it will also be human. It will be led by Moses and others who will ultimately speak liberation to the people. It might be hard for us to place ourselves in Egypt in this time, but I think it's incredibly important, especially in a moment of political transition that we are in, even here in Shelby County, to imagine together and to remember together that the message of the Gospel, the message of the God of all Creation, is one of Liberation, is one that that frees the people, that unburdens them, that brings them into a bright, hopeful future that they can't even imagine. It's important for us to keep that in mind. Maybe you got done with early voting yesterday. Some of y'all sent me text messages of pictures of the long lines that you were in, or maybe you're going to get out there on October 5th. Either way, it's important for us to be participants, because the work of liberation is not Divine only. There is a responsibility of us humans to partake and lead in it. But when God reveals God's name, there's something for us to hold on to there. "I am who I am," God says, or translated differently "I will be who I will be." That caught my attention this week as you can see from the sermon title, and we have there a present and a future tense. That's interesting for a people who are deeply, deeply related to their history. The Israelites have a a long significant narrative. Perhaps we do as well, but God doesn't say that God's name is "I was who I was." Instead, God says "I am who I am" and "I will be who I will be." God says, "I am here, present, right now, in the midst of what you are dealing with, and I will be in that new place where you are going." And maybe that holds the key for us to put ourselves in the place of the Israelites there. Maybe you, maybe you understand your need for liberation from a different perspective. Maybe yours is not a taskmaster that holds it over you the bondage that has been inflicted upon you. Maybe yours, your...your oppression is something different. Maybe your oppression or the thing that oppresses you might feel more like grief. Maybe the thing that consumes you or holds you within bondage uh might be...might be anger. It might be unreconciled relationships. It might be your...your propensity to compare yourself with someone else. It might be your judging of others that seems to kind of keep you constricted. I don't know what the place is from which you need liberation, but what I do know is that each of us can find ourselves in places where we are all consumed, where we don't feel like there is a way out, where we can't fully be ourselves because this burden is placed upon us, or we allow it to be placed upon us any given day.

And if you can imagine yourself in the places where you are trapped, the places where you are enslaved, then perhaps you might know and you might hear God's name differently today. God wants the people who are oppressed, the ones who need liberation to know, "I'm right here, in your present moment, and not just that, but I will be in the next one that you move into. Whether that is from your place of addiction or from your place uh of grief or whatever it is, I will be right here with you; and I will be in that place to which you are going." I was reflecting on a phrase I heard from a pilot friend of mine back in Georgia a couple years ago. He was talking about

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the...the importance when we when a pilot is in the midst of a traumatic experience, let's call it a life-threatening experience. Um, there's three rules that they really need to hold fast to in that moment. I saw...I know we have at least one pilot here this morning. Maybe there's some others; maybe y'all have heard this before. For someone who is in the midst of trauma or a pilot who is in the midst of peril, let me say that, the pilot is to always remember three things. There is nothing less important to a pilot in trouble than the air above them as they descend towards the Earth, the runway behind them as they either try to hit the brakes or take off, and the fuel that they've already burned. It's interesting because the pilot lesson is when you are in the midst of difficulty, you need to stay fully present in the moment that you are in; and you need to be thinking about the moment you're moving into. What has passed is of no value to you anymore. You need to be fully focused on what is ahead. That's important for us, I think, because the work of justice takes time. It often involves failure. For the story of Moses it took people being willing to disregard what they have been told to do. Liberation takes courage. It takes perseverance. The work of liberation doesn't happen by accident, or even by Divine action alone. The work of liberation happens when human hands are unafraid to get dirty, when Divine, Divinely inspired hearts lead to action. The story that Moses is to communicate to the people in Egypt is that God desires their liberation. God desires for them to be freed from the thing that has held them in captivity and in bondage. And maybe for us this morning we need to hear the same thing. Maybe, so it'll change the way in which we serve in our community, or maybe, so that we might know that God is with us in our peril and is leading us into our own liberation. The work that Moses is called to is also work that we are called to—to be a voice for those who need liberation and to know that that liberation is ours too. So may we take courage from Moses and the craziness of the story. May we know that God is present with us here. “I am,” God says, “and I will be.” May we know it to be true this day and every day.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen