

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Trinity XVI

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the second Book of Moses, called Exodus.¹

“Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the back-side of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy 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 upon God. And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out

of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain. And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the First Epistle General of Blessed Peter the Apostle.

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same af-

Cyrus of Persia, were not even aware that they were being used as God's human agents.

God is not reluctant to use any part of His creation to carry out His will for the rest of creation. He sometimes uses angels, who are part of His creation. He uses rain and wind and the sun, which He has also created. And since we too are His creation, the God with no name uses us as well, people who have names, to accomplish His work.

You might be one of those people. You could be one of the human agents through whom God speaks and works. You have a name. You have a brain. You have hands. You have feet, you have a mouth. God can use all of them.

You don't have to be especially smart, or especially strong, or especially talented to be of use. Remember it is God who is doing the work. You are simply lending Him the body parts that He has given you. Moses did that. Mary did that. All the Apostles did that. Many have done it. You can do it too.

You have ears. Do you hear him calling your name?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a memorable line in *Aurora Leigh*. It is with that line that I will close: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afame with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes."

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928/1943).

flictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

It was not Moses who brought the Jews out of slavery in Egypt. It was God.

When God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, He gave him an assignment. But He did not simply send him on his way. He said, "I have come down. I will go with you. I will deliver them."

God, of course, does not have human body parts. We talk about Him as if he did, but we all understand that when we do that we are speaking metaphorically. That's really the only way we can speak about God. But God frequently borrows human body parts when He has a use for them.

God borrows human hands to build churches and erect altars and make vestments, and to touch people in order to heal them and comfort them. When He needed a human womb, God borrowed one from a young Jewish virgin. When He needed a human brain to lay down the foundation for subsequent Christian theology, he borrowed one from St. Paul and another one from St. John. In the case of Moses, God borrowed his human mouth to address the Pharaoh and to give the Jews laws to live by. When Moses spoke, it was really God speaking through him. God even said, "I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say."

Moses was not really satisfied with that promise. He had not yet learned to trust God completely. So God said,

"O.K. I'll borrow your brother's mouth as well. You can tell him what to say and he can speak to the people."

But Moses was still not satisfied. He wanted to know more about this God who was speaking from a bush that was on fire but was not burned up. This was a god that Moses knew very little about, and he wanted to know just what kind of god he was being called to represent.

Moses had been reared in the court of the Pharaoh, so he knew a lot about the functions and powers and limitations of the Egyptian pantheon. He wanted to know those things about this god as well.

Moses' Jewish mother was his nursemaid in Egypt and no doubt had told him something about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so God identified Himself by saying, "I am that God." But again Moses was not satisfied so he asked God His name.

When you are given a name, you are given an identity and a place in the order of society. Without a name you have no definition of yourself and no sense of your place in the order of things. Your name defines you and so when Moses asked the name of God, he was asking God to define Himself.

Moses was not the first to ask that of God. Jacob asked him also. But God simply refused to answer. "Why do you ask?," is all He said.

God's response to Moses appears in print as a four letter word. The Hebrew alphabet contains no vowels, so no one really knows how to pronounce the word that those four letters form. Most scholars agree that it is some form of the verb "to be." So God was simply saying to Moses, "I am what I am."

A definition implies boundaries and limitations. God does not have boundaries and limitations, so in a sense He does not really have a name. He just is.

The God of the burning bush is not just one among many deities. He is not limited in His sphere of influence. He is the reality behind all reality, the ground of all being, the uncreated creator without whose existence there is no existence. God is the primary existence from which all other existence is derived.

This is the god who marched into Egypt and presented His claims and demands to the Pharaoh. This is the God who turned the Nile into blood and bound the sun god, Aten, so that there was darkness for three days throughout the land. This is the God who parted the sea and fed His people with manna and gave them water out of a rock. This is the God who showed the Jews how to worship Him, how to serve Him and how to live as a free people. And He did all that through the human agency of one man.

Just as it was through the human agency of the blessed virgin that the Savior came into the world, so it was through the human agency of Moses that the nation of Israel was formed.

Over the centuries God has used thousands of people to accomplish His work in the world of time and space.

Some of these people, like Mary, have immediately said to God, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to your word."

Others, like Moses, have argued and resisted and gone through many excuses before finally consenting to place their humanity at God's disposal. But eventually God always gets what He wants. Some people, like the emperor