

I AM

Exodus 3:1-14

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro,^[a] Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. ² The Lord's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. ³ Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up.

⁴ When the Lord saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

Moses said, "I'm here."

⁵ Then the Lord said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground." ⁶ He continued, "I am the God of your father, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the Lord said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. ⁸ I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. ⁹ Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. ¹⁰ So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

¹² God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am.^[b] So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'"

Today, we introduce our theme for 2022/23 at NDPC. The theme is "*BE.*" Be-ing. Be is a verb—being is the present participle, it means to objectively exist. Being is also a noun—a thing that exists, most often a living thing.

Being is a quality that all of us share. We exist, we are, we are alive. Yet, being is something many of us take for granted. Few of us spend a lot of energy reflecting on our "being."

That all changes, however, when we experience something that comes to threaten our being. When we get sick, when life throws us into upheaval, when we lose what we love—that's when we become aware of the fragility, the precarity, the beauty, the miracle of our being. All of us

have been living for more than two years through a time in history when threats to being are knocking at the door: COVID 19. The climate catastrophe. It's not an exaggeration to say that we, your pastoral staff, felt drawn to focus on being because being is threatened.

But it's not just COVID 19 or the climate. At times, it even feels to me like the very way of life we human beings have created—the way of life we call “normal”—is a threat to our being. Faces in our screens instead of toward each other, working long hours at jobs that we're not sure mean much, navigating faceless bureaucracies to get some medicine when we're sick, living in a culture that tells us that we are only responsible only for ourselves and not each other. Sometimes “normal life” feels antagonistic to being.

When our being is in danger, it can destabilize us in a deep way. A way that we may not even be aware of. We feel it, though, in our bodies and especially in our spirits. Anxiety is a response to threats to our being. Loss of sleep. Despair. Self-medication. Threats to our being—real or perceived—a re existential threats.

At church this year, we want you to focus attention on your being. How is your being? We want to invite you also to think about *our* being—how are we as a congregation and as a community at being together—are we *with and for* each other? Finally, I want us to focus on God's being. What can we say about the being of God?

Today, we begin by exploring being through the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Let's dive into this story and see what it says about being.

- First of all, where is Moses? He's in *Midian*. Where's that? Without getting technical, Midian is far away. Moses is in the desert, literally *and* figuratively. He's there because he's a fugitive. Years ago, Moses killed an Egyptian soldier who was abusing a fellow Israelite. Even though Moses was raised in the Pharaoh's house—he's afraid that if he is brought back, his true identity as an Israelite—who were effectively non-beings in the eyes of the Egyptians—would be revealed.
- Moses out in the desert with his father-in-law's sheep. And the story says he goes to the edge of the desert—to the wilderness of the wilderness. And of course, that is where God's sacred mountain is. Of course it is. Mount Horeb, known as Mount Sinai is at the end of the earth.
- The setting for this encounter with God is the edge of the world. And Moses is a person whose being feels very much uncertain.
- In that place, Moses sees something. What? A bush, on fire. But it is not burning up.
- A voice calls out his own name, “Moses!” And Moses says, “Here I am.” He's not dreaming. He exists in this space in this moment.
- And God—for now the story says this is God—says, “Take off your shoes. I am the God of your ancestors. I've seen my people—the people I love—being oppressed. I have heard their cries of suffering. I've come to rescue them and deliver them to freedom. And to do that, Moses, I need you... to go and tell Pharaoh to free my people.”

- God sends Moses on a fool's errand to preserve the being—to re-dignify the being—of a people deemed worthless. That's a pattern
- Moses, to his great credit, has reservations. I know that in scripture Abraham is always the one lifted up as the pillar of faith for his obedience to God in going to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith is borderline criminal, let alone worthy of emulation. But Moses—now here is a faith I can commend you emulate.
- First of all, notice how much agency Moses has in this story. The text says it is Moses who moves to explore the sight of the burning bush. Moses has a holy curiosity—he's willing to see a sign and go toward it. It's not until Moses makes a move toward the bush that God speaks.
- And notice that when God tells him to do this outlandish thing—when God says, “Go to the most powerful man on earth. The man in charge of the fiercest armies. The man who will expose your true identity and crush you for killing his soldier. Go to him and tell him to let my people go!”—Moses says, “are you sure It's me you want?”
- Moses pushes back against God. But God is ready. God says the one thing that all of us long to hear, all along the way, whether we are being called to something great or whether we are sitting alone with our thoughts. God says to Moses, “I'll be with you.” I will be with you. That is God's assurance to Moses. It is God's assurance to you.
- And Moses... he's still not convinced. He says, “When the people ask ‘what God sent you,’ what should I tell them? What, may I ask, is your name?”

Names matter. Everything that is has a name. Your name marks your uniqueness. It is your identity. In the first Creation story, giving beings their names is woven into the act of creation itself. You could even say that a thing does not exist until it is named.

What is God's name? Well... It's four letters; to be precise, four consonants. Yod. Heh. Vuv. Heh. Except, there are no vowels in this name. They're not left out by accident. They're not there. It makes this name *unpronounceable*. You are not able to say this name. Why not? There is a sense in the Hebrew Scriptures of the absolute beautiful and blinding holiness of God. Even as God comes close to us and God delights in loving us, the text insists there is something about God is that is un-fathomable. We cannot look at God. We cannot make an image of God. Even though we know God's name, we cannot say it.

Later Scriptures replace this un-sayable name with “Adonai,” which means “Lord.” To this day, our Jewish friends refer to God as “ha-shem,” “the name.”

But even though you can't say this name, it is not jibberish. It's not random letters thrown together. Etymology is the study of the evolution of words and there are few words with a more elusive etymology than the name of God.

It seems to be connected to another Hebrew word, “havah.” What does “havah” mean? To be. Be. It's hard to know whether to render this as a noun or as a verb, but scholars over the years have offered all kinds of translations for the yod-heh-vav-heh:

*the one who is
the existing one,
the ever-living one,*

Some have read the tense as future oriented and have offered

The One who will be

The One who is Becoming

the one bringing into being

“The One Who Brings into Existence Whatever Exists”

Some have even said that being-in-time-and-place is intimated:

‘I will be present wherever and whenever I choose to be present,’

What is the name of God? What is God’s identity, that quality that sets God apart, that makes God, God?

I am Being Itself.

God says to Moses, when the Israelites ask, tell them “I AM” sent you.

I don’t know what you make of this. Maybe you think its all just language games. Let me offer what I make of it. Long ago, our mothers and fathers in faith reflected on their experience of God. And they tried to find language—they tried to find the words—to describe what is so hard to describe. They tried to find words for their sense of awe. They tried to find words for an overwhelming sense of wonder. They tried to find words that described a peculiar sense that we have that when we are by ourselves, when we are out on the edge of existence, when our being feels precarious or threatened, that even there—especially there, we are not alone. Our being is not all that is. They tried to find words that captured the mystery and the beauty of being alive, of being part of something much larger than we can imagine.

They knew a God who is the source of Being itself.

What is God’s name? You can’t pronounce it. But you know it. Just as surely as you know your own name and you know yourself to be, you know God’s name, “I AM.”