

## “I AM...”

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bjork  
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – July 3, 2022  
Lesson: Exodus 3:1-15

Gracious God, may we hear your liberating and faithful word of love to us this day. Give us hearts and minds open to receive your Spirit’s presence, blessings, and good news for this moment in our journeys of life and faith. Amen.

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We continue today with our summer sermon series, *Getting Our Story Straight*, in which we are exploring some of the important stories of our faith tradition. And the story of Exodus is definitely one that everyone should know. And probably most of you already know it fairly well. Who’s seen *The Ten Commandments*? *The Prince of Egypt*?

It’s no wonder the Exodus story has been a favorite of movie makers. There’s conflict and drama, Egyptian fashion, fascinating and multi-dimensional characters, wild and vivid scenes like the plagues that are unleashed upon Egypt (you may remember that we made a little home movie about that part a couple of years ago when we were worshipping at home). There’s the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, the chase of Pharaoh’s army, the escape of the Israelites into the wilderness... and that’s just part of the story (though it is the most action-packed part). Later on, we get to manna in the wilderness, Moses’ trips up Mount Sinai to commune with God and receive the law, the delivery of the Ten Commandments, and that idolatrous Golden Calf that the people make and worship when they get impatient for Moses’ return (all enabled by his own brother, Aaron).

The book of Exodus opens where Genesis ends. In Egypt a new Pharaoh is now in power, one who did not know Joseph (who, as you recall from last week, gained position and influence in his Pharaoh’s court). The Hebrew people have now become so numerous in Egypt that this new Pharaoh views them as a threat. So, he decides to oppress them, enslave them, and inflict hard, forced labor upon them – making bricks, building cities, and working in the fields – controlling them, using them, and trying to prevent them from rising up and taking away his power.

Exodus is the story of an entire people, and it is the story of Moses, the somewhat unlikely prophet who is called by God to speak truth to power and to lead his people to freedom. As you probably recall, Moses’ mother spares him from Pharaoh’s attempted genocide of all the Hebrew baby boys by sending him down the Nile river in a basket. Pharaoh’s daughter finds him and saves him, defying her father’s command. And, aided by his sister Miriam’s intervention, Moses’ own mother becomes his nurse. There are some strong, courageous, and faithful women in this story.

Moses grows to adulthood and discovers the suffering of his own people. One day, he witnesses an Egyptian man beating one of his own Hebrew people. And Moses ends up killing that Egyptian man and hiding his body in the sand. Not the best use of his righteous anger! Word gets out and Moses must flee as a wanted criminal.

And so, he finds his way to Midian. And that is where he meets his soon-to-be father-in-law's family, including his wife, Zipporah (who has one of the coolest names in the Bible).

And one day, as he's shepherding the family flock in the wilderness, he receives this call from the burning bush – this dramatic sign of God's presence. What a way to get Moses' attention and ours too, as we hear his story.

“Moses, Moses.” “Here I am.” “Take off your sandals, this is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors. I have observed the misery of my people, heard their cry, know their suffering. I have come to deliver them. And I'm sending you, Moses, to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

Moses' response over the next part of the text is a little unsure, “uh, who me? Why me? How will I get them to follow me? I'm really not much of a public speaker. I think you might have the wrong guy.”

“And, by the way, if I do this, who should I say sent me? What's your name, God?”

“I AM WHO I AM,” says God. “Tell them I AM sent you.” Another way to translate this response is “I will be what I will be.”

Ok, so that's as clear as mud. Evidently, all Moses needs to know at this point in time is that the God of his ancestors is getting to work, doing a new thing, responding to the cries of God's people, and calling Moses to play a key role. More will be revealed in due time.

And that's exactly what happens. As the story unfolds, God demonstrates who God is. This call from the burning bush is not only about what Moses will do, but serves as a prelude to God's actions throughout the rest of the book.

The entire narrative arc of Exodus is important because it illustrates much of the foundational theology of the Jewish tradition that continued to unfold and develop over the millennia. This is theology that was known, commented on, and lived out in the ministry of Jesus and later by his early followers. We should absolutely know this story. It is the story of our Jewish siblings in faith. And it has become our story too.

In addition to being one of the defining stories of a people of faith, this story can also be read through the lens of our own personal story of faith, our own journey – our own experiences of being brought out of and liberated from what has bound us; of finding God in our own wilderness moments; of growing in our relationships with God and with one another; of traveling toward the promised lands we long for – of wholeness, healing, peace, at home in God's love. This is a big story, a community story, a people's story. And it is also a very personal story.

“I AM WHO I AM,” says God.

Right off the bat, speaking from this burning bush, God reveals that I AM... the compassionate one. God hears the cries of God's people and responds. Nothing would follow if God had not listened for the cries of God's beloved. Our God is a God of compassion. For all who suffer in so

many ways, for all who are oppressed, harmed, and killed (physically and spiritually) by systems of domination and control, God is compassionate. God cares. God weeps. God draws closer when we are in need.

This exchange with Moses at the burning bush illustrates that God's motivation to act is compassion. And if God is motivated by compassion, then we should be too. Compassion ought to be our starting place when we engage all of the complexities and challenges of this life and this world in which we live. We cannot adequately and meaningfully engage issues of economic, racial, and environmental justice; of peacemaking in a world at war with itself; of human rights, autonomy, and dignity... without compassion. And how can we truly be compassionate unless we listen deeply and openly to the lived experiences of others? God listens. God feels. So might we.

In the next movement of the story, God demonstrates to a hard-hearted Pharaoh who won't budge that I AM... the creator. God the creator unleashes creation itself upon Egypt causing utter chaos and destruction. Each of the plagues: turning the Nile River to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, locusts, darkness over the land, dead livestock, skin boils... all serve to demonstrate who is really in control, who really has power in the created order. Pharaoh's earthly power has limits and is no match for the power of the Creator God.

There is a troubling amount of violence in this display of power, especially when the tenth plague unfolds and kills the first born of the Egyptians. But there is also dramatic irony that becomes clear to us when we remember that the current Pharaoh's predecessor was the first to attempt such a slaughter of the Hebrew boys. It is tragic that it gets to this point, that this hard-hearted Pharaoh is unable to relent and refuses to release his grip on power, even as the world he has built for himself has now been dismantled before his very eyes. The plagues serve as a warning to all with earthly power that their power is limited and that there are consequences when that power is abused. Will we ever learn humility?

Finally, the Hebrew people are let go. But Pharaoh pursues them, which ends up being his fatal mistake. As the waters of the Red Sea part, making a way out of no way for the Hebrew people to escape, and then the sea rushes back over their pursuing captors, God proclaims, I AM... the liberator.

This is one of the central messages of the Exodus story. God liberates. God frees us from that which binds and enslaves. God's power to liberate is stronger than the powers of this world that seek to enslave, control, and dominate. God's will is our collective liberation from all that prevents us from being truly free – free to be ourselves, to be treated with respect, fairness, and dignity, to have the things we need to thrive and enjoy good lives. Exodus proclaims that God brings liberation, both personal and societal.

This story has been a beacon of hope for enslaved peoples throughout the centuries. And if we take it seriously, there is no justification to be found in our theological tradition for the enslaving that we have done to our fellow humans throughout history. We have no excuse. When we enslave and oppress, we are not on the side of God. For God is on the side of those who are oppressed, those who long for liberation. And this theological proclamation calls us to work with God towards liberation for all.

As the people journey into the wilderness, God reveals that “I AM... the guide.” God’s presence leads them onward as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. How often in our own wilderness wandering experiences have we longed for such a definitive sign of God’s presence and guidance? It would be nice to follow such a clear path. But that isn’t always how life goes.

Our experiences of God’s guidance might not be so obvious. And discerning what next steps to take, which direction to go, might be difficult sometimes. But God, the faithful guide, is always there – leading us onward – in the fire of the Holy Spirit that burns within us, in the love and support of those who journey with us, in the faithful witness of those who have gone before us. God continues to guide.

And when the people get thirsty, and hungry, and more than a little whiny (and they do get pretty crabby and Moses gets pretty exasperated), God demonstrates to them that “I AM... the provider.” Water to drink, manna and quail to eat all show up when needed. Their need is legitimate. And God provides.

All their lives, their worth had been defined by what they could produce for Pharaoh. They were given enough to eat and drink so they could work. And yet, they start to long for that predictability, as problematic as it was. They wonder where this wilderness journey will lead them. And will they have what they need to thrive and survive. We wonder those same things too sometimes.

Trusting God to provide takes faith. Stepping out in a new direction takes faith. Figuring out what’s next when things don’t go as planned, takes faith. And yet, God provides. It might not be magical manna from heaven, but sometimes what we need most, or who we need most, show up when we are most in need. And you never know when you might be the next one God calls and sends to respond to someone else’s need. You have been. I’ve seen it.

All of these demonstrations of who God is lead up to the moment when God reveals that “I AM... the covenant-maker.” This whole story is about the building of a relationship between a people and their God. God wants a good relationship, build upon the covenantal commitments of each party. The Ten Commandments are all about this relationship. They illustrate how we should relate well to God and relate well to one another. They aren’t rules just for the sake of rules. They are about respect, love, and forming just and peaceful relationships.

At the heart of our individual and collective journeys of faith is this covenantal relationship with God and with each other. And it is a life-long journey in which we deepen our experience of and relationship with our loving God who is compassionate, who is the creator, the liberator, the guide, the provider, and so much more.

“I AM WHO I AM” God said. I will be what I will be.

God’s not done yet. What new things might God reveal to us as we continue this journey of faith toward that Promised Land where milk and honey flow – where all are fed, all are loved, and all are free?

Amen.