

Sermon, September 3, 2023

Exodus 3:1-15

“ The Many Names of God”

In 1838 the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School invited Ralph Waldo Emerson to come there and deliver the commencement address - which he accepted. It is a very interesting speech and quite long - miles longer than any of my sermons! Among the students there were also professors and local clergy , who became so angry about some of the things Emerson said in the address that it would be another thirty years before he would be invited to speak at Harvard again.

I won't go into detail now, but just point to the fact that Emerson saw the church as being stuck in a rut, expending too much energy looking back at what was revealed in the past, and not paying attention to what God is saying today. He said, “Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead”. Then further on k said, “...that God is, not was that He speaketh, not spake”. Today, that idea is echoed in the UCC's slogan, “God is Still Speaking”.

Now, I don't believe that means that we just cast the Bible aside, but we do have to recognize that when God spoke through the prophets ,and through Jesus , it was addressed to a very different world than our own. We have to be open to the possibility that God has other things to say to our own generation. The question is, do we have the ears to hear? Are our hearts and minds open to new possibilities? And do we truly believe that God speaks to us, and if so, how?

In today's reading Moses “ comes to Horeb, the mountain of God”. In the ancient world it was largely believed that gods dwelt on mountain tops. While there, God speaks to him through a burning bush that was not consumed. Again, God was often associated with things like fire, or the wind, even earthquakes. But in 1 Kings, God spoke to Elijah in “a still small voice”.

But before we can even begin to understand how God communicates to us, we need to have a sense of who or what God is- perhaps that being even more difficult to grasp. After God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his people go, Moses asks who he should say this command is coming from. God replies,” I am who I am”, which I am sure would leave anyone perplexed. There has never been a consensus as to how that is to be translated from the Hebrew. Some say, ‘ I am who I will be’, others, ‘ I will be who I will be’. Later, in chapter 33 of Exodus, God says to Moses, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I shall show mercy to whom ii shall show mercy”. All this boils down to one thing - the ultimate and absolute freedom of God -

God will be and do what God will be and do. In the words of the Reverend James Forbes, former Senior Pastor of Riverside Church in New York, “ You cannot put God in a box!” In other words , we cannot point and say this is God, or that is God. If we come to the point where we say , or think, that we fully understand who and what God is, we have created an idol in our mind. We have to let go and let God be God!

We each experience God in different ways. If I may offer an abbreviated version of a story from the Buddhist tradition - A king tells one of his servants to go find four blind men and an elephant and have each of the men touch different parts of the elephant, then come and report to him what an elephant is. One man feels the elephant's ear and says that an elephant is like a giant leaf. Another grasps the elephant's tail and says an elephant is a kind of rope. One takes hold of the elephant's leg and reports that an elephant is a tree, and another, holding the elephant's trunk decides that an elephant is a giant snake. Each of them experienced individual parts of the animal but failed to see or experience the reality of an elephant in its entirety. It's the same for us. We experience God in various ways but do not know or understand the reality of God in God's wholeness. Take note, as well, that each of the men misinterpreted their experience of the elephant. This, sadly, can also be the case with some people's idea of the Lord. If we equate God with hatefulness, bigotry, violence or injustice we are far off the mark.

In today's reading we see that God is compassionate, and throughout the ancient text we see God as merciful, forgiving, and loving, and, hopefully, as we open the doorways to our souls, we find that to be true in our personal experience. Although we cannot see or hear God in a literal sense, we know that God wants to be known , and reveals his self , and his love for us in many ways.

God is known by many names, each expressing different aspects of his divine Being. In the Jewish tradition - Yahweh, Elohim , El Shaddai, for us Christians, Lord, Creator, Father or Mother, for the Hindu, Brahman, and for the Arabic , Allah. These are just a few, but whatever name we attach to the Holy One, we should be aware of God's sacred freedom, and always let God be God! Amen.

Let us pray: Loving One, we praise your holy names, and thank you for your presence in our lives. Although there are ways that you are hidden from us, we know that you reveal Yourself to us in many ways - through the words found in sacred texts, through the example of your Son Jesus, in the depths of prayer, through the soft tones of the wind and the rumble of thunder, but most of all, when we open our hearts to you, you enter in and let yourself to known in the far recesses of our souls. We know that you have spoken to generations past, and we ask that you give to us the spiritual ears needed to know your voice in the heart of silence. As always, we pray that your presence be known to those who are sick, those who are dying and those who mourn, those who face oppression, violence, and injustice, those who need food and shelter, and those who yearn to fill the emptiness of their lives...Amen.