

Sermon: I AM WHO I AM

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, May 22, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever wonder why does God insist on calling people to do God's work, especially when people are often stubborn, resisting, and are prone to fail God so miserably? Have you ever wonder why God, being Omnipotent (that is all-powerful), Omniscience (that is all-knowing), and Omnipresence (that is all-present), why God would ever need us at all to be coworkers in the Kingdom of God? If you haven't, well, maybe you should.

Today, as we continue on the sermon series exploring the various significant mountains in the faith life of Israel, we come to Mount Horeb, also known as the Mountain of Yahweh. We come face to face to the burning bush where Moses encountered God and was first called to serve.

The name Horeb appears infrequently in the Old Testament, mostly in the book of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and 1 Kings, but never in the New Testament. Many biblical scholars consider Mount Horeb as another name for Mount Sinai, mainly because Moses and the Israelites received the Ten Commandments on top of that mountain. John Calvin, in his commentaries vol. 3, is known to describe the two, Sinai and Horeb, as the same mountain, with the eastern side of the mountain being called Sinai and the western side being called Horeb. Abraham Ibn Ezra, a respected Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages, suggests that there was one mountain with two tops, which bore these different names. Whatever the case may be, we will be focusing on Sinai and the giving of the Law in next week's sermon. But today, let us look closely at the call of Moses, on Mount Horeb, beside the burning bush.

Right off the bat, I would like to highlight the disobedience of Moses. At that particular stage in his life, Moses was already 80 years old. He was a former slave turned prince. Though grown up in the Pharaohs' court, he remembered his Hebrew roots. Unwilling to accept the suffering of his own people as slaves, Moses took matters in his own hand. He killed an Egyptian slavedriver and fled to the wilderness as the result. He then settled in the land of Midian, got married, and worked as a shepherd keeping the flock of his father-in-law.

Life had been hard on Moses, and it had been a disappointment. His former grandeur had all but faded, and he had now settled as a simple folk, in his latter stage of life. As he tended to his flock of sheep beyond the wilderness, he came unknowingly to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

What an odd sight to behold, so Moses approached, walking ever closer to that burning bush. At this point, a voice called to him out of the bush, God called out the name of Moses and instructed him in verse 5 to *“Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”* It is interesting to note that most commentaries on this passage assume that Moses complied, and removed his sandals, as instructed by God. But that is not what the Scripture actually says in the following verse. In verse 6, God explained who God is, by saying, *“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”* And in reaction, Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. He hid his face, he never removed his sandals.

Hebrew storytelling is quite fascinating. As a general literary rule of thumb, obedience is often depicted by a recipient’s action matching precisely the command, often word to word. In the case of the story of Moses standing beside the burning bush, the lack of a clear description of him removing the sandal ought to be quite jarring, an ominous sign of further disobedience to come. And it came like a flood in the subsequent interaction between him and God in Exodus chapter 3 and 4.

After God explained why Moses was being called, that God has heard the cry of the Israelites, that Moses was being sent back to Egypt, to lead God’s people out of the land of slavery. Instead of praising and acknowledging God, of God’s merciful and just nature, Moses objected to this call. Five specific objections came from Moses (I counted, and there were 5).

In 3:11, “Who am I that I should go...?”

Perhaps a sign of humbleness.

In 3:13, “What is your name?”

or to paraphrase, ‘Who are you to send me?’

In 4:1, “They won’t believe me or listen to me.”

Those stubborn Israelites, count me as one.

In 4:10, “I am slow of speech and slow of tongues!”

Did Moses stutter? He certainly was not slow to object.

Then finally, the last objection: In 4:13, “Send someone else!”

In face of every one of these objections, God provided signs, patiently explained why God is sending him, that it is the Lord who gives speech to people, it is God who opens and shut the eyes and ears of all mortals. Despite all God said and did, Moses still insisted “send someone else!” What a gall of that mortal to refuse God, not once or twice, but five times. Yet, it is in this interaction we come to know who God really is. “*But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*” (Psalm 86:15)

One of the more challenging aspects of pastoral work as a minister is to raise up coworkers in a congregation. Invitation by the minister is often not sufficient. I often have to encourage people, to pray with them, promise to walk with them in their serving life. When people stumble, and inevitably we all stumble, I have to remain steadfast, to be strong, and hoping in the process, to project and to give hope. I find myself doing all these, even though I am often not strong enough. Many times I came close to quitting altogether (but God won't let me). Many times I cry out to God when looking at how people, many a faithful Christian, inevitably mess up God's church, regrettably wounding the body of Christ. I wonder, why wouldn't the Lord just simply come down and throw out everyone of us, and simply do everything Himself? But God did not, the Lord would not.

In God's interaction with Moses during this call on Mount Horeb, we also got a glimpse of the God-self in the self-revealed name of God. To the best of our knowledge, the name of God is pronounced as Yahweh, although no one is really sure, and no one is supposed to say it correctly, unless you are the high priest of Judaism, and only once a year in a specific occasion, and only in the inner court, the Holy of Holy of the temple in Jerusalem.

The tetragram, or the four consonants of *YHWH* is further elaborated by God, in the Hebrew language, as *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, often translated in English as '**I am who I am**'. Grammatically, it is the verb 'to be' or 'to exist' constructed in the imperfect tense. A better translation should be: I was who I was, I am who I am, I will be who I will be. I exist in the past, in the present, and in the future, simultaneously. God exists beyond time and space, God is infinite and unchanging. When we are called to follow this Great I AM, we embark on a journey of trust and obey. What God has planned to fulfil, God will see to it, to be brought to completion. Nothing we

do can really mock it up. Even in our worst nature, the Lord's will shall be done.

Here is a theological truth that we could all celebrate: **God does not need people, people need God.** Here is one true nature of God: God delights in fulfilling his will through people, through you and I.

Recently, Daisy and I have been discussing on what to do with the two violins in our home that are not being played. Both Justin and Neo have cease their violin lessons with their long beloved and trusted teacher. We had hope that they might pick it up, after a brief hiatus, but it is looking increasingly not to be. These are good full size violins that we have invested substantial sum in. We are thinking of loaning one of them to their cousin in Vancouver, who is in need of a full size violin.

No decision has been made yet, but I am reminded by the story of the great Italian violinist Niccolo Paganini, the most celebrated violin virtuoso of the 19th century. In his dying wish, Paganini willed his marvellous violin, // *Cannone Guarnerius*, his beloved treasure, to the city of Genoa, on the condition that no one else could ever play it again. The interesting thing about violin is the wood of such an instrument, while used and handled properly, wears only slightly. But if set aside, it begins to decay, and decay rapidly. Paganini's lovely instrument of exquisite music has today become worm-eaten and useless, except as a relic in a museum.

You may be wondering what does that violin have to do with our faith. Well, in our walk with God, we are that violin, that needs to be played by its master. God is our master. God who created us out dirt, who rules us and all created beings, also calls us to serve, not for God's good but for our own. Just as a violin needs to be played its master, so do we need to serve and to worship our true Lord.

Yes the cost of following the Lord may be high, and it is foolish not to count the cost. We may even have to bear our own cross in order to follow Christ. Yet that burning bush is an enduring symbol of faith, also an enduring symbol of our denomination of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. A symbol that says our faith may be tried and tested, we may be burned or burned out, yet the Great I Am is journeying with us, burning brightly through us, and we shall never be consumed.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.