

Sermon: I Am Who I Am

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep. 3, 2023)

The Guidance Conference is an integral and critical process, by which all candidates working to be certified as Minister of the Gospel of the Presbyterian Church in Canada must successfully complete. It usually is a 3-nights, 4-days retreat whereby ministry students undergo rigorous examinations by counsellors consisted of experienced ministers and elders. It usually occurs mid-way through a student's seminary study, allowing them enough time to be certain of their call to ministry, to be prepared to answer some tough questions during the Guidance Conference.

These examinations are not easy. They occur via three pre-set formal interviews, but students are also being observed, evaluated throughout the conference, throughout all activities, planned or unplanned. Setback during the Conference can result in prolonging the overall length of one's seminary study. Failure to pass the Guidance Conference almost certainly means the end of one's hope to be certified as a minister of this denomination.

I've seen candidates broke down in tears when given the bad news. Sounds harsh, but it is our denomination's way of exercising collective discernment over one's private call to ministry. Our way of saying, "We believe, prayerfully, that God is calling such-and-such person to one day serve as an ordained minister of the PCC."

Let me be clear about this, the final decision to ordain a minister or not, actually rests in the hand of the certifying presbytery. And of course, the student must also successfully complete and obtain a Master of Divinity degree (or equivalent) from their seminary studies. But the Guidance Conference, and the recommendations from that process, are almost always followed.

Ask any student who had undergone the Guidance Conference, they will tell you it is a life-altering experience, never to be forgotten. That's how I picture Moses, when he was called by God at Mount Horeb, through a burning bush.

There is one key difference though, unlike those attending the Guidance Conference, who believed they were already called by God, and hoping their inner calls be confirmed by the community of faith, Moses was

the polar opposite—he did not relish the experience nor did he wish to be called.

When we catch up with Moses in today's passage of Exodus 3, Moses was already an eighty-year-tired old-man. He was born a Hebrew slave, raised an Egyptian prince—accorded all the royal privileges that no Hebrew slaves could ever dream off. He saw the sufferings of his people, tried to correct that injustice in his own way—by killing a particular harsh slave-master. For that crime, he was driven out of Egypt, stripped of his privilege, and for all intents and purposes, never to return. Moses then spent the next 40 years of his life, tending to sheep for his father-in-law in the land of Midian.

He wasn't looking for a new adventure. The suffering of his people was in the back view mirror, a distant and almost forgotten memory. Yet, God appeared in that burning bush—a bush that was burned but not consumed. And God called him to do the impossible—to return to Egypt and to lead the Hebrew people out of that land.

Oh he resisted. I preached on the disobedience of Moses last year. If you should recall, I made the case that Moses, when asked by God to remove his sandals from his feet for the place on which he stood was holy ground, did he comply? No, Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God. Now compared that to Joshua, who promptly removed his sandals when was asked by the commander of the Lord's army, in the book of Joshua, chapter 5, Moses was much more disobedient.

Our Scripture reading today did not cover the entirety of his encounter with God. If you should continue to read the rest of Exodus 3 and 4 as well, you would know what I am talking about. What follows the initial call at the burning bush are five specific objections from Moses: "Who am I that I should go...?" (3:11) "What is your name?" (3:13) "They won't believe me or listen to me." (4:1) "I am slow of speech and slow of tongues!" (4:10) "Send someone else!" (4:13) To be honest, if Moses were to be put through the Guidance Conference of the PCC, I am pretty certain he would have received a clear fail, with no opportunity to 'try again'.

Last year, I was invited and served as a counsellor at the Guidance Conference. It was my first time serving in that capacity. I had previously served on the Ministry & Personnel Committee of the Presbytery of Montreal, so interviewing and counselling ministry candidates is not new to me.

There was one candidate at that conference, to this day, still haunts me. Like other candidates, he was eager to be certified, eager to serve the Church. His skill-set and aptitude was good, better than most. He came across as sincere and humble, and was well liked by other counsellors.

However, during the initial interview, the topic of his past trauma surfaced. You see, years ago in his home country, he had witnessed, endured, and barely survived an ethnically-driven mass killing initiated by the country's dominant tribe (and permitted by the government of the day).

When probed by the counsellors how he had processed that trauma, and should opportunity arise, would he be willing to share the Gospel in his home country, the candidate, visibly shaken, categorically rejected that possible call. He was very adamant he has not forgiven his countrymen, nor will he ever forget that mass killing.

What ensued, amongst counsellors during multiple rounds of decision making process, was a heated theological debate over this candidate. Can someone who is unable and unwilling to forgive, serve as a minister of the Gospel, preaching forgiveness in Jesus Christ? Can someone who is still, by all definition psychologically and spiritually wounded, help others to find healing in Jesus? Could God not call and use deeply wounded individuals to help build the kingdom of God?

The answer to that last question is certainly a 'yes'. Looking at Moses, he was as wounded as they come. He possessed no discernible qualities, no comparative advantage, no skill-sets nor aptitude that should justified this call from God. For God's sake, Moses was not even obedient or willing.

Yet somehow, God saw otherwise. And in God's interaction with Moses before the burning bush, we also received this self-revealed name of God—I Am. Actually, in the original Hebrew language, the name of God was written in a tetragram, or the four consonants of YHWH. To the best of our knowledge, it is pronounced as Yahweh, but no one is quite sure. What we do know is this name is elaborated by God, in the Hebrew language, as *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, often translated in English as '**I am who I am**'.

Grammatically speaking, *Ehyeh* is the verb 'to be', constructed in the imperfect tense, not the present tense. So perhaps a better and more encompassing 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 beginning), I exist in the present (as I am here with you), and I exist in the future (at the end of time),

simultaneously. Isn't that beautiful! God exists beyond time and space. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension.

More importantly, when we are called by the Great I AM, that call, a journey of trusting and obeying, is irresistible. What God has planned and pronounced, God will see to it be done. No amount of our resistance or woundedness can really mock it up. Even in our worst nature, the Lord's will shall be done. That is a lesson that Moses will learn in time, as he went on to serve the Lord, and became the greatest servant leader of the Old Testament.

That Guidance Conference candidate did receive a pass with conditions—as he certainly has things to work on. I don't know what has become of him, as counsellors were not permitted to retain any information on candidates, not even our personal notes. To be honest, I don't remember his name. But I remember what he looks like, I remember the pain he expressed so openly, the open wound he carries. To this day, I still pray for him.

We, as the denomination of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, has embraced the 'burning bush' as our logo. You can see the latest stylized iteration on the cover of this week's bulletin. It is a reminder to us, as the Church, how we are called by God. In time of great uncertainty as to the our collective future, that we may be tried, tested, and burned, but by God's grace never be consumed.

I will leave with you what we as a denomination professes as our Living Faith:

9.3.3 The Bible witnesses to God in Christ entering deeply into human suffering. As we behold our Saviour on the cross, we are convinced of God's love for us. Faced with the pain and agony of the world, only a suffering God can help. God is with us in our anguish.

9.3.4 Faithful men and women of the Bible also knew pain and uncertainty. Yet they experienced God and felt compelled to speak of God moving powerfully in life. Christian faith is a response to the searching presence of God. Christian belief brings new meaning into one's life, for life's true purpose is to glorify and to enjoy God.

In the name of the Great I Am,
of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**