

“Knowing the Great I AM”

February 22, 2015

The God We Can Know series – 1st Sunday in Lent

Personality quizzes never go out of style. From questionnaires in newspapers and magazines to surveys online, you can find all kinds of tests to tell you who you are and what you’re like. For any of you on Facebook, you can take quizzes about which Disney character you’re most similar to or delve into really important matters like: What color is your aura?

All kidding aside, we always seem to be trying to figure out who we are. We’re always seeking to firm up our identity. And it’s not a bad thing because knowing who we are helps us to live out our purpose and calling. Usually when we describe ourselves, we use words that speak of our relationship to others. I am a daughter, a spouse, a mother, a pastor, and so on. But maybe it’s not enough. Researchers explain that a fuller picture of our identity takes into account a few things: *whose* we are (the imprint our parents, faith, and culture have on us), *who* we are (what makes us unique), *whom* we share life with (the communities we relate to), and *where* we are going (our purpose and direction).

When Moses encounters God, he faces an identity crisis when tells him to go to Egypt. We find Moses trying to figure out who God is. He wants to know the name of the One who says, “I am the God of your ancestors.”

Names are important. I’ve always liked knowing that my last name before I got married meant something. Bement comes from the French Beaumont for “beautiful mountain.” And we know that in Scripture names carry great meaning. When Mary and Joseph receive the news of Jesus’ birth, they also receive a name. “And you shall call him Jesus because he will save the people from their sins.” When Mary Magdalene is weeping in the garden because Jesus’ body has been moved, it’s that moment when she hears her name called that she realizes it’s the Lord speaking to her.

So a name matters. Moses wants to know who’s sending him for a couple of reasons. First, he’s unsure and needs some confirmation. Second, knowing the name also carried some weight. It’s like when you’re negotiating with someone and want to support your offer. Well, so-and-so said it was a good idea.

For Moses, going to the Egyptians and demanding that the enslaved be set free is probably laughable. This is a powerful empire. Why would they listen to him? Consider, too, that he’s also in trouble. He killed an Egyptian, so there’s no safe place for him.

But besides his personal stuff, knowing the name of the One who telling him to go is important. For some, knowing the name meant power and control. Knowing a name also said something about a person’s character. For Moses to know the name of the One who speaks gives him an idea of what this God is like.

But Moses is like some of us. He just doesn't want to go, and he's got good excuses. There's someone better. He's not good enough. But God's response is simply that he's not going alone.

God's response to Moses is, "I Am Who I Am," or in Ancient Hebrew, YHWH. God doesn't respond with a noun, but with a verb, a form of "to be." "Thomas Cahill says we can interpret this response in three different ways: (1) "I am he who causes (things) to be"; (2) "None of your business"; or (3) "I will be-there with you . . . which emphasizes God's continuing presence in his creation." God is an ongoing powerful presence and a creative force, refusing to be limited by a simple name."

This isn't about how good Moses is or how prepared he is or how much experience he has or anything else. God doesn't promise to make Moses brave enough or eloquent enough. When Moses meets God that day, God promises to be with him. One writer says, God's "revelation never satisfies human curiosity, but is an invitation to trust, to move out into the future with this God who will be there."

So God's self-disclosure is key. I AM WHO I AM. Um, what? That phrase might confuse us. But God's response to Moses says something about our relationship with God. God knows the suffering of the people. God knows Moses. God knows and wants to bring salvation.

We can't figure God out fully or know how God will move or put limits on God. God is not a vending machine made for our every whim. But we can be assured that God wants to be known. And we can be assured that God knows us. God is the Great I AM. God's power is real. God's presence is true. God's grace is sufficient for us. And every moment of every day we can trust that God is enough.

For those of us who find ourselves struggling today, take comfort. When God speaks to Moses and says, "I AM WHO I AM," it's not a far-off promise to hold onto for a future time. It's a promise to accept and celebrate today! "I AM WHO I AM" right now.

God leaves it all open-ended. Moses and the Israelites will keep on learning who God is as their story unfolds. As God reveals "I AM WHO I AM," Moses begins to understand who he is and what he's called to do. And that's our hope in this time, too - that we would grow in our knowledge of God and of ourselves.

So in this Lenten season, we'll be exploring how Jesus uses the same beginning "I Am" to share who he is and why we need him. Lent is an annual spiritual check-up for us, and we'll be asking a tough question: Are we allowing God to be the Great I AM for us? Is God enough for us in a world where there are so many choices?

God got Moses' attention at the burning bush, but what he saw wasn't as important as what he heard and what God said. When God answers with "I AM," there's a sense that God is mysterious. When we consider God as Creator of this vast universe, sometimes it feels like

God is distant and powerful. We've struggled sometimes just like the psalmist: O God, why do you stand so far off? Where are you?

But God also knows us intimately. God loves us deeply and wants to be known and close to us. And when Jesus uses phrases like "I am the Bread of Life" and "I am the Light of the world," he's speaking to people who ask something of him. They wanted sustenance. They wanted guidance. And we're no different.

This old news is Good News: God wants to be known. God wants us to know him intimately, to trust him fully, to love him wholeheartedly, to serve him faithfully.

All the personality quizzes in the world can't help us figure out who we are. But when we seek God and stay connected to one another, we discover who we are as God's beloved. God knows us.

So in this season, how can we focus on getting to know again or maybe for the first time? We can you "fast from" - take time away from social media, forego a meal during the day or don't eat out? What can you "feast on" - set aside time to be in silence, pray, read a psalm or a passage of Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you? Would you give more generously, or even commit to tithe for the month of March and see how God will transform you?

I pray that this Lent is a holy time and a even a habit-forming time when we'll allow ourselves to be challenged by "I AM WHO I AM." Is God enough for me? For you? Will we trust him?

Thanks be to God. AMEN.