

## Sermon Archive 238

Sunday 31 March, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Exodus 3: 1-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Because human beings have imagination and curiosity, because we have the capacity to see ourselves within the context of history (with its progress, regress and responsibility), because we have a moral sense, and because it's natural for us to want to "name" who we are and what we're for, the question will always come: "who is God?"

- God - the object of our ultimate concern?
- God - the great thou of the I / thou encounter?
- God - a word?
- God - the numinous, the mystery?
- God - the ground of our being?

Part of our growing up as human beings is learning to ask and answer that question: who do they say I am? Who do you say I am?

From his wilderness, just before the events that will define his people, Moses begins to construct his answer. In this sermon, I want to treat his story as something of an allegory of humanity - humanity, aware that it needs to grow and get on with life, coming to terms with its God. And so, herewith, a series of six short meditations.

-ooOoo-

Again, it's set in the wilderness. It's a wilderness story. Moses is in the wilderness because he's messed up in the city. Having murdered another human being, he's now an outlaw - on the run. The wilderness is no place to be, but we guess it's better than prison. It's a place where Moses can avoid the consequences of his actions - punishment for his crime. It's not exactly a place of denial - for he's taken his conscience with him - and it'll remind him of what he's done. It'll re-run the event - bidding to come the recurring thoughts and mind-pictures that cycle over, repeating, repeating - look what you've done. There's no escaping the conscience! But here in the wilderness, he *can* escape the punishment. No one's coming a far as the wilderness for payment - for justice, for retribution. So humanity busies itself in the meantime with the menial task of watching sheep. Humanity is building for itself an

unspectacular sort of alternative life - option B. After the crime, avoiding responsibility, it's called "wilderness". And that was meditation number 1.

-ooOoo-

After the crime, hiding, Moses notices something strange. "Who is God? Don't ask me that; I'm just trying to work out what's up with this bush." Moses is engaged at the point of his curiosity. Why is it that the sun appears to move in the sky? Why does the water level rise in the bath when we climb in to wash ourselves (Eureka, I've got it!) How many angels dance on the head of a pin? Big questions, silly questions, moments of discovery. The unusual things. The exceptions. The as-yet-not-understood. "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up" - humanity says, and this becomes a point of engagement with God. Whenever any fine mind is stimulated to wonder, to question, to theorise, hypothesis, is that not Moses turning aside, beginning to wonder? So surely the family of faith will thank Galileo for his telescope! And surely the choir will sing the praises of Darwin's baffling book! Ah well . . . Maybe not. This is, after all, after the crime, and curiosity can kill the cat. Maybe we should just accept our world as un-conversational. In the wilderness - and that was the second meditation.

-ooOoo-

After the crime, hiding, noticing, Moses is told to take off his shoes. He's asked to perform a humble gesture of respect. Engagement with God deepens as the human being learns to pay respect - respect for the ground on which we stand - respect for the conversation that is beginning - respect for the Other who addresses us.

*Touch the earth lightly,  
use the earth gently,  
nourish the life of the world in our care:  
gift of great wonder,  
ours to surrender,  
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.*

*God of all living,  
God of all loving,  
God of the seedling, the snow and the sun,  
teach us, deflect us,  
Christ reconnect us,  
using us gently, and making us one.*

*[Shirley Murray]*

I, of course, have no need to take off my shoes, because I already know everything.

You have nothing to teach me. I am right. I am totally exonerated. I am the only one in the mosque with my boots still on. Everyone else has taken off their shoes - that makes them weak. I will show you strength.

Yes, **that** is wilderness. God calls us to deeper engagement by living with respect. In respect we talk further with God – we become more profoundly engaged - and that was the third meditation.

-ooOoo-

After the crime, hiding, noticing, respecting, Moses receives the first “I am” statement. The question “who is God” finds its first emboldened answer. God talks about the ancestors. “I’ve been talking to your family for a long time now”, God says. I am old, I am age. I am wise, I am wisdom. I am word, I am the conversation. And yes, I am the One who made the promise and now am keeping it.

Yes Abraham feared and Sarah laughed out loud. Isaac was old, blind and gullible. Jacob was a complete greedy, grasping conman. Shady lot, your family, Moses! But I was their God, as I will be yours. No flash in the pan, you could call this “faithfulness”. You could call it “commitment”. If you really wanted to, you could call it “everlasting covenant”. Your family has generations. You have history. You are part of the longer story. And in it all, through it all, beyond it all, I am the present One. And if you, yourself, learn to be present ones - if you are present to others as faithfulness and commitment, then we will be making progress with the question: “who is God”. And that was the fourth meditation.

-ooOoo-

After the crime, hiding, noticing, respecting, confronted with faithfulness, Moses is prompted to remember the people whom he has left behind - the people in the city from which he has fled. They are the people among whom he had committed his crime. They are the people of whom he used to be a part. He’s still unsure of how to answer the question “who is God”, but the One with whom he is conversing has a concern for these left-behind people. This God knows their suffering, and wants them helped. Is it a matter of justice? A point of principle? Is it a simple humane concern about suffering? Or is it love? Moses still needs to work that out. But for now, there’s something contagious about it. Moses is realising that growing up into his humanity, learning how to answer the big question of God, is going to involve him helping those people. And that’s going to involve going back to the place from which he has fled. It’s going to involve

putting the Option B half-life away, and taking up the frightening task of speaking truth to power. "Courage, Moses; do not stumble". There are times of crisis when we learn the importance of courage in speaking. Saying "no" to casual racism. Saying "no" to supremacist movement. Saying "no" to violence and oppression - and there will be echoes of the sermon about the peace-maker shedding blood on the cross - costly work, and frightening. We, as we learn who God is, and what that means, may cut our fingers. But we will be deepening our capacity to embody the answer to the question: "who is God". And that was meditation number 5.

-ooOoo-

After the crime, hiding, noticing, respecting, confronted with faithfulness, called to cut his fingers for the sake of the people, Moses commits himself completely to the question. He asks the question out loud: "who are you? What's your name?"

God answers "I am who I am". Get on with it!

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Because we have imagination and curiosity, because we have the capacity to see ourselves within the context of history (with its progress, regress and responsibility), because we have a moral sense, and because it's natural for us to want to "name" who we are and what we're for, the question will always come: "who is God?"

God says to Moses "I am who I am". The speaking One. The One who simply is. The calling One, the sending One. When the people ask you "what is his name", and you answer with your service and sacrifice, you will have come in from the wilderness.

People of God, we cannot hide. We have to learn and live the answer to the ultimate question. Who is our God; and who are we?

Flaming, provoking, questioning, exploring. Respecting, touching our world lightly and with care. Learning the art of faithfulness and long-suffering wisdom. Returning to the people and working for their freedom. Taking off our shoes. Coming in from the wilderness for the new beginning. Those were six meditations. Now we keep a moment of quiet.

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