

I AM A WILDERNESS

Rev. Bert Marshall

Exodus 3:1-15

POEM (from *Daughters of the Dust*, a film by Julie Dash, 1991)

I am the first and the last

I am the honored one and the scorned one

I am the whore and the holy one

I am the wife and the virgin

I am the barren one

- and many are my daughters

I am the silence that you cannot understand

I am the utterance of my name

A long time ago, when our children were little, we went to visit friends in Marietta, Ohio. Their children were little, too. He was a UCC pastor serving a church there. He, his wife, and I had grown up together in Weeping Water, Nebraska – my hometown, at the western edge of the dry land corn belt, south of the Platte River, out on the prairie. Our town produced three ordained United Church of Christ ministers – a feat not recorded in any history book that I know of. There are Native American burial mounds in Marietta. We went to visit them one day. They're located right in town, in a residential section. The highest was said to be a royal burial mound, and there was a staircase built up around the side that led to the top, so we climbed up. You could see the whole town from up there, and the Ohio River, and the church my friend, Dale, was serving. It was beautiful. As I stood there looking out over the area I began to meditate on what lay beneath me, the bones of Native peoples, royalty, and the idea that this ground where we were standing was holy. I was trying to think deeply about this sense of holiness when suddenly I noticed a tingling sensation in my feet. It was coming from the ground and it began to move slowly up my legs. I was riveted to the earth. I couldn't move. I don't know how long this went on. Thirty seconds? A couple of minutes?

The rest of our crew decided to go on back down to street level and left me to whatever they thought I was doing. The sensation subsided, then vanished back into the earth, into the burial mound, and I slowly made my way back down to join the others, fully convinced that some sort of spirit connection had been made. I believe that to this day.

Moses stands before the burning bush. He is standing on holy ground. He removes his sandals. Moses asks God's name and gets an ambiguous verb form as a response! *Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*. We could spend hours on this! Here is a sampling of the translations of this mesmerizing form of the verb *hayah* (to be). I'm not making these up. "I am who I am (or what I am)." "I will be who I will be." "I will become who I will become." "I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy." "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious." "I am the Being, who is eternal." "I who used to be the One is I who shall be the One." "I am like the one with whom I am." "I who was, who am, and who shall be." "The one who says to the world, be! and it is – and who will say to it: be! and it is." "It is I, Myself – it is I who am about to reveal Myself." "I will love whom I will love." Robert Alter, in a lengthy footnote to his wonderful translation suggests that "I Am He Who Endures" is plausible, or with another form of the verb, "He Who Brings Things Into Being" . . . Imagine having a name like this yourself! . . . What is being conveyed here: a mystery; a revelation? An acknowledgment of limits? A disclosure of not-knowing? A statement of incompleteness? *Hebrew verbs are not conjugated the way verbs in Indo-European languages are. In Biblical Hebrew there is only complete action or incomplete action.* The multitude of translations and interpretations suggest to me the possibility that complete (I am what I am) and incomplete (I will be who I will be, etc.) here function together to indicate both immanence and transcendence, being and action, meaning and purpose – a sublime ambiguity in which eternity is created from ordinary language, conveying what Paul Ricoeur called "a surplus of meaning".

But wait. What if the meaning of the words is not the point? All the interpretation and commentary with which I'm familiar – and there are

mountains of it! – focus on the *meaning of the words and the possible verb forms*. But what if it's not about that at all? We don't know the original *sound* of the Name, we don't know the original vocalization, we don't know the proper inflection that fits the mind of the storyteller, not to mention the inscrutable mind of God. Is the Name supposed to be like the "om" of Buddhist chant? When I say it, it sounds like a whisper or a soft breeze: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. The name derived from this – *Yahweh* – also sounds like a whisper. *Yahweh*. Try it with me. *Yahweh*. Perhaps the essence of the Name is in the sound of it, not the words or the verb construction. Was it meant to be spoken? Sung? Chanted? Devout Jews in early Judaism considered it too holy to be uttered aloud, and it was only spoken once a year, on the Day of Atonement, by the high priest in the holy of holies inside the temple.

There's more. God says to Moses: "I have observed the misery of my people", "I have heard their cry", "I know their pain (or sufferings)", "I have come down to deliver them . . . , to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey", "the cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them."

Fast-forward a few chapters (12:40-41): The narrator says, "The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt."

Four hundred thirty years! Rewind back to Moses facing the burning bush. Recall God's words to Moses: "I have observed the misery of my people, etc. . . ." Really!?! . . . What was God doing for those 430 years? Did God know nothing of this? Did God not hear his people or feel their pain in all that time? What of the souls of this God's enslaved people who died and came to him during those 430 years – did he not notice; did they say nothing? Indeed, this is a recurring pattern throughout the biblical text: God's belated appearance; God's belated response. God "comes down" to

see what's going on – in the Garden, at the Tower of Babel, before the Flood, at Sodom and Gomorrah, now in Egypt, and on and on throughout Israel's story. Over and over again we see *God's belated deliverance*.

On and on, down through the ages, to this very day: the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria; the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and exile in Babylon; the destruction of Jerusalem and dispersal under Roman occupation; destruction of communities and slaughter of thousands during the Crusades; the Inquisition & expulsion from Spain; persecution by Christians throughout the centuries; the deaths of six million during the European Holocaust . . . The lack of divine timeliness is striking. The historical resonance with the current spike in antisemitism is chilling.

The fourteenth-century mystical *Zohar Vayyiqra* says, "*Ehyeh* is the mother become pregnant"; "*Yhwh* is the blossoming stage for the All." Rashi (12th century) paraphrased *ehyeh asher ehyeh*: "I shall be with them in this misery as I shall be with them in their slavery to other empires . . ." If only he knew. Rabbinic literature generally follows Rashi: the first *ehyeh* means 'I will be with you in the servitude in Egypt', while *ehyeh asher ehyeh* means this *and* that God will be with them in future servitudes to come. They had no idea what was yet to come.

God says to Moses out of the burning bush: "I am who I am, I will be whom I will be, I will become what I will become" – but I am nothing without my people! *I am a wilderness! I am a wilderness alone without my people.* I am a verb without an object. I am not yet complete. I am, *what*; I will be, *what*; I will become, *what*?

Ehyeh asher ehyeh. I am a wilderness. I am the silence you cannot understand. I am the utterance of my name. I am the whispering of these words. I am the crackling of this fire. I am the blinding blaze of light coming from this bush. I am the tingling sensation in your legs. I am the mind who made all of this. I am the

power who will lead you to your freedom. I am the holiness in the heart of your being. I am the numinous center of the universe. And I cannot exist without you.

Some days, you ask yourself: “Who am I, exactly? What will I be; what will I become; where will my life lead?” And you find – sooner or later – that you, too, are a wilderness – alone, without your people, without the people whom you know and love, who know and love you, and everyone else – all those with whom you’ve been cast into this worldly sojourn. You also find that God’s deliverance is sometimes at hand, sometimes belated, sometimes nowhere to be found. You look around and wonder why God is not always there at the drop of a prayer. But we don’t stop praying. You look around and wonder why God seems not to be serving the best interests of God’s people, but we don’t stop serving them. You look in vain to see God at work in the midst of human greed and violence, but we don’t stop working for justice and peace.

You walk along your path and sometimes you see light reflecting off a wall or a stone face, or shadowy movements in your peripheral vision, and you turn aside to see what it is. You hear a voice calling from a grove of trees or an alley, and you turn aside to see where it’s coming from. Moses turned aside from his everyday path and encountered far more than he expected. *But God waited to see if Moses would turn aside, and when he did, then God called to him out of the bush.* God waits for us to turn aside from our well-worn paths, waits for us to turn and make ourselves susceptible to transformation (Ellen Davis), waits for us to turn toward the voice that calls us into relationship and covenant, waits to reveal mystery and purpose, waits to send us into the world to bring good news to the poor, liberation for the oppressed and release to the captive, to bind up the brokenhearted, to lift up the lowly, to speak truth to power, to feed the hungry, to advocate for the powerless, to speak for the ones who have no voice, and to stand in solidarity with those who are crushed by the system.

God the Name, the ambiguous verb form, sends Moses out from this holy ground to liberate his people and to lead them through a wilderness that

was apparently unknown even to God. God's only promise is to be with him. And belatedly or otherwise – you can decide – God kept the promise. And keeps it still, to this day.

You walk along your path. You see light dancing in a clearing. You hear a voice calling to you. You turn aside to see what it is. You remove your shoes and plant your feet on holy ground. A tingling sensation seizes your feet and begins to rise up into your legs. And you see a great sight, unlike anything you've ever seen before, a flame of fire coming from a bush, and you look and the bush is blazing and yet the bush is not consumed . . .

You are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.