

Let's Speculate
By Reverend Litton Logan
September 3, 2017

Scriptures:

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There 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. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, [□] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Exodus 3:1-3:15 (NRSV)

Sermon:

Initially, I may sound like I am coming out of left field as we look at our text, but I hope to pull it all together with practical insights and scriptural authority about the nature of God and our relationship to God.

First, let me state the obvious: we can never know God as God is, in God's essential nature, which is in fact what our text implies today. I think the only things we can know about God are the manifestations of God as the unwavering and sustaining power of reality, and God's mediated presence through others and creation. Anything else is highly speculative. Be that as it may, I would like my speculations, if I make them, to coincide with a high degree of probability with the realities of my life and the world I live in. As Dr. Ronald Osborne said, in his book *Faith We Affirm*, "the Disciples' mind is biblical, reasonable, empirical, pragmatic, and ecumenical."

We modern Christians are the inheritors of a bunch of abstract ideas about God, primarily from Plato and Plotinus, via the Church Fathers, Origen, Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine of Hippo, and later Aristotle via Thomas Aquinas. These explanations and definitions of God come to us as the early Church Fathers sought to defend Christianity from within relevant cultural models of their day. To this point, I add that it is the elites of society that write scripture and

define theology and in our case Christology, which often differs from how the average person understands things and lives out his or her faith-life. I think the early Church Fathers and many Christian theologians that have followed lost sight of certain aspects of God portrayed in scripture that were and are extremely vital to us.

I do not mean to denigrate the Greeks because we owe them more than you can image, but simply to say that the early Hellenistic Church Fathers overly emphasized the concrete and impassable aspects of God at the expense of another critical dimensions of the Holy.

I will also add that when the classic theology is pushed to its logical conclusions, human beings lose the power of self-determination, freedom of choice as it were. Compound this with Thomas Aquinas' position that God, who is all-powerful, all-knowledgeable, and all-present, created everything out of nothing, there can be no distinction between God permitting things and causing things.

Furthermore, I think with a close listening to many contemporary Christians and non-Christians and their ideas about God, we can hear echoes of the ancient Greeks and their theologies; wherein, Zeus, the supreme god, ruled from a heavenly abode on a throne surrounded by his fellow gods and goddess and their minions. These capricious gods moved humans, creation, and creatures around for their purposes without due regard for the pain, suffering, and violations of personhood that they caused.

St. Anselm (C.E. 1033-1109), a brilliant teacher and defender of the Christian faith, has given the most elegant and simplest description of God I know and it has stood the test of time and the ravages of criticism. Anselm's position, which incidentally captures the essences of Exodus 3:14, simply stated is: God will always be what God is as the reality behind any descriptions or explanations we may develop. Furthermore, none of our beliefs, explanations, creeds, or theologies will change the essential nature and character of God as Creator and Sustainer of All Life, but they will affect how we seek and relate to God and others and consequently how God relates to us.

This morning I would like to point out the scriptural perspectives on God that most of us live by. Basically stated, in my way of thinking, God as Creator and Sustainer of Reality is all powerful, no doubt. However, in scripture there is another dimension to God, albeit understated in classic theism; which is, God in certain aspects of the divine being is not All-powerful, but only Most-Powerful because God has shared some of the power of creative and self-determination with us.

I think the first step in understanding this perspective less traveled is to be found in our appreciating the very sophisticated, although embryonic understandings of God held by the writers of Genesis and subsequent Hebrew texts. These ancient sages understood God as the All-Powerful Organizer-Creator and Sustainer of Reality, but also as one who relates to creature, creation, and humankind and is changed by that relationship. In the Hebrew sages' minds, God is not some aloof, abstract, and unchangeable being, although God at times seemed far away for God's people. In our text today, as in Genesis, and other places in scripture, God is one who is aware of, cares for, and relates to people, where they are, as they are, while seeking to move them toward righteousness or right relationships to others and to God.

At the time of the events recorded in the book of Exodus, drawn from oral traditions and written down during the Babylonian Exile, nine hundred to a thousand years or so after the events recorded, there was a danger of the people being assimilated into the culture of their conquerors. The Israelites, like most people in the Ancient Near East at the time, believed in many gods but their god, their elohim, was Yahweh, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Later, the exiles' understandings of God would go radical - radical monotheism that is; wherein, Yahweh is understood to be the only God, Creator-Sustainer of Reality.

To sum up, the sages in recording their stories of God and God's dealings with the people gave the Israelites and us a dynamic, relational understanding of God, not some static, abstract being, who is aloof from creation and creature and unmoved by worldly events or a totally egotistical god like other people's.

As the story goes, Moses, an Israelite raised among Egyptian nobility, is now living in exile after having murdered an Egyptian overlord for abusing a fellow Israelite. Moses has found a people, married, had children, and settled in for the duration of his life. One day, while out tending his father-in-law's sheep - a lowly position in the scheme of things, but fitting for someone considered an outsider - he sees a strange phenomenon - a bush on fire yet not being consumed. Out of curiosity, Moses approaches this burning bush, which is in fact an angel of the Lord. Normally, angels or messengers that mediate God's presence or bring God's word appear in some human or sentient life form, but here the messenger takes on the form of fire, a substance evocative of the divine because it is insubstantial yet powerful, dangerous, illuminating, and purifying. Suddenly a voice speaks from out of the bush calling Moses by name - now, get this, the one speaking knows Moses' name. Moreover, Moses gives the common response of a prophet when called by God - "Here, I am."

As Moses approaches the bush, he is instructed not to come too close lest he oversteps human bounds and presumes upon the sphere of the holy. Moses is instructed to take off his shoes - profane things of human construction that come between Moses and the sanctified ground of God's presence.

This voice from the bush tells Moses that the One, who is speaking to him, is the god of his ancestors. Moses hides his face in terror in the presence of the radical "Other" that is not of this world.

Let me pause here in case some have been lulled into the familiarity of the story to reiterate that in today's scriptures in the mind and myths of the ancient Jewish sages, there are no abstraction, no metaphysical hoop-ta-la, convoluted explanations or interpretations to this story. God speaks, Moses hears: Moses speaks, God hears.

Many of the ancient sages and later the rabbis understood and interpreted much of scripture metaphorically, giving God human-like qualities, but none-the-less, these passages today make it clear God relates, hears, and acts on behalf of God's people.

God is ageless while being the God of a distinct people in time and space. God tells Moses that God has seen and knows the plight of God's people in Egypt and motivated by divine compassion makes the Holy Self known through this fiery portal. Now, the God of Abraham wants Moses to be its spokesperson, a divine change agent, and to deliver the descendants of Abraham from their sufferings and struggles.

Did you ever speculate as to why God chooses to work through human agents? Why not just go down to Egypt, dazzle and overwhelm every one with some god stuff, and lead the people away? Why go through all the messiness of dealing with Moses, the people, Pharaoh, etc.? Another question: why doesn't God always make the events of cause and effect mild and beneficent instead of allowing natural disasters, human evil, etc? Why bother to try and lead humankind into doing what is best for them - just leave us alone and let us self-destruct? Well, I think given the model of God I am outlining and that most of us live by, we understand that the Creator, in keeping with its divine purposes and its own potential in relationship to us, chose to share the power of self-determination with humankind, as a means of moving us and the divine-self toward a more complete and holy relationship one day.

God in keeping with the divine integrity, however, can't withdraw or override human choice willy-nilly or cancel out the sustaining laws of cause and effect every time we humans overstep our limitations, get into trouble, or natural events exceed our expectations. I say this

because those principles that favor certain human skills of leadership that gave us a Moses led to a Hitler. The natural forces that led to Hurricane Harvey bring much needed rains to other places.

Traditionally, we've explained the tragedies of natural disasters and human evil by rescuing the God of classic understandings by blaming Adam and Eve for corrupting everything in the Garden of Eden, which is a much later theological development of Greek influences. This blaming, I might point out gives Adam and Eve a power the logic of classical theology said they couldn't possess. In my way of thinking, humankind is still in the processes of becoming, evolving into what God had in mind for us from the beginning. That is, I don't think we were once full glasses, now half-empty; but, glasses in the process of becoming full. But, that's another sermon or better yet a class.

After Moses makes his protests and God assures him of the divine presence and assistance, Moses asks for God's name. I mean, Moses can't go traipsing off to Egypt and tell the people to gather up their stuff because they are getting out of there and heading out across the wilderness based solely upon the instructions and promises of some unknown god. Granted, God gives Moses an impressive historical pedigree as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but no name.

In the ancient mind, a god's name, like a person's name, was not just a something used to distinguish them from others. A name commanded recognition of who and what a god or a person was - tapped into their power as it were and located them within the authority of a people's history. To know a god's name or a person's name gave one the power to bid or manipulate. I mean a person couldn't just pray or pay homage by saying, "Hey, you, gods," and expect to get the right god for their needs out of all the gods. You've got to identify the god you want. Also, God, speaking through the portal of the burning bush, didn't say, "Hey, anybody out there?"

Nevertheless, the god of Moses' ancestors will have none of this name stuff. This god of Moses' ancestors said very clearly:

*"¹⁴ ..., "I AM WHO I AM." ...
This is my name forever,
and this is my title for all generations.*

The writer of Exodus has God describing God's essential nature by giving a rather vague and cryptic answer to Moses. In the Hebrew idiom, God's response could be read something like, "Never you mind who I am!" or "Mind your own business!" (Introduction to the Old Testament, *Anderson, p. 21-22*) Therefore, God will simply be what God is. To this, I reiterate: we cannot know that which is not of this world, so we need to stop all the hairsplitting over fanciful descriptions and speculations about God and how God is or is not God; does or does not work. It is sufficient for the person of faith to know that God is the Creator-Sustainer, who desires relationship with us based upon our mutual capacities to love. So, I recommend we live by the best way we know to be good for all life on this planet and love God vicariously by loving our neighbors, creatures, and creation as ourselves.

Please forgive me, but I feel I must reiterate that our text this morning points out that God has an aspect that changes based upon God's relationship with humankind. Therefore, human experiences affect God as the story of the Hebrew slaves tells us. God has empathy with us, sympathy for us; God hears our cries, our prayers, etc. God responds to us in our sadness, sorrow, and joy. God hears us and seeks to influence things on our behalf, usually through the agencies of others; people, who are curious about, open to, and attuned to the call

of God. That call, the whispered lure of the Spirit, born in part out of our natural talents and abilities, familial and social influences may call a person to enter one of the many helping vocations or call people like us to reach out to others in time of need, or do our part in trying to make things better for creation, creature, and others. Therefore, in my logic, God will not or cannot violate the physical, sustaining laws of cause and effect or other people's rights of self-determination for good or ill at our requests and remain God. Therefore, we must always be curious and open to learning the ways of life and death.

We contemporary folks with all our abstractions, theologies, philosophies, and sciences, are in truth no further along in understanding God than the writers of our text today. However, in this story of Moses' calling, we get a clear insight into God's nature as being compassionate and caring for God's people, honoring all people's rights of self-determination, even the Egyptian Pharaoh, and in picking and sending the right people to do the right things. This is the same compassionate concern that led God to send or call out Jesus from among God's people to bless them and concomitantly the world.

In closing, in all these abstractions, let me share something that grounds me in my understandings. I want to share with you Reinhold Niebuhr's wonderful prayer that he included in a sermon in 1943:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

Bibliography

Anderson, W. Bernhard, Steven Bishop and Judith H. Newman. *Understanding the Old Testament*, 5th ed. Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2007.

Viney, Donald, "Process Theism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
URL= <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/process-theism/>>.

Brueggeman, Walter. *The Book of Exodus, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. X of the *New Interpreters Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994 online, Ministry Matters.