

SERMON TITLE: "Who Am I?"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 3:9-15 and Matthew 16:13-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 23, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

For my husband's birthday in May, I bought him one of those Ancestry.com kits. Steve swabbed the inside of his cheek and sent off his sample. When they returned the results, there weren't really any surprises. Just like Steve knew in advance, his people came mostly from Wales, England, and northern Europe. The new thing that Steve did gain from his experience was that, by checking the box that allowed for information sharing, the DNA test has put Steve in touch with some of his cousins who had also sent in their DNA swabs. Over email and text messages, they've had a little family reunion. These cousins who hadn't seen or thought much about each other in decades have now made contact with each other. For Steve, this has been a reinforcement of his identity as a member of the James and Baird clans.

I haven't yet done a DNA ancestry test for myself, but I did just go to our Mountain Sky Annual Conference. Every year, that event seems to me like a family reunion. Those are my people. We sing the same songs, pray the same kind of prayers, and face the same challenges. We talk with one another about how it is with our souls, and we reaffirm our dedication to John Wesley's theology of personal and social holiness. We share what we've been doing in our mission outposts, and we deploy people and resources to those places where God is calling us next. For me, annual conference is a place where I reaffirm my spiritual identity. It's a place where I'm reminded whose and who I am.

In today's scripture readings we hear this same theme of identity. The question is raised of Moses, God, Jesus, and Peter. Thousands of years ago, they didn't have DNA tests or even an annual conference meeting, but they had their ways of figuring things out. So let's dig into these stories. How did these conversation partners answer the question, "Who am I?"

1—WHO IS MOSES?

The first character in these passages to raise the question of identity is Moses. In Exodus 3, God told Moses that God was going to send him to Egypt to rescue the Hebrew people from slavery. Moses' response, in Exodus 3:11, was the question, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" In this context, Moses' question, "Who am I?" signified humble self-doubt. He thought God was asking him to do something beyond his ability. He couldn't imagine that he himself had the right or the power to confront the mighty leader of Egypt.

Exodus, chapter two, tells us that the Hebrew Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter since the time Moses was a little baby. We can guess that, adopted into that royal family, Moses probably benefited in substantial socio-economic ways. But, like many adopted children, Moses may not have ever felt like he belonged there or that those benefits were rightfully his. Moses probably always felt like an interloper, an ugly duckling, a misfit, who would never succeed in that environment and with those people. Moses probably felt like he belonged more out in the wilderness herding sheep.

And then came along God, speaking from a burning bush. By calling out to Moses and giving him a big job, God challenged Moses' inadequate sense of himself. God challenged Moses to recognize his own potential, his own power, his own abilities. God challenged Moses' sense of identity. In Exodus 3:12, we see that God challenged Moses to think of himself as one called by God, one sent by God, and one who would be accompanied by God.

We can learn from this conversation. If we, like Moses, are ever inclined to ask, "But who am I to do something big that God is asking?" we should realize that our wise God can see in us skills, abilities, and worth we don't even know we have. We should also realize that God never asks us to go and do anything alone. God calls and sends us, but God also goes with us. When we ask, "Who am I?", the answer should always be "I am one who is accompanied by God."

2—WHO IS GOD?

And that, of course, leads us to the next question that Moses asked God. Moses wanted to know, “Who are you?” The voice from the burning bush had already identified, in verse six, as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” That was a good start. This was the God who belonged to Moses’ biological ancestors. But, if Moses were going to follow through on this calling, he wanted to know more. In verse 13, we see Moses asking for God’s name. God’s reply, in verse 14, was, “I am who I am.” God indicated that, if the Hebrew people wanted to know who had sent Moses to rescue them, Moses should reply that “I am” had sent him.

The name “I am” is at the same time both mysteriously vague and full of meaning. This description implies that God is pure being and thus the source and ground of all being. Yet, by not answering I am *what*, God also left open the truth that God is not any particular thing that can be defined. God is too big, too great, too beyond for any human categorization.

If we ever think we’ve got God figured out, we should remember that God will always be more than we can comprehend. In any thoughts about believing in God or not believing in God, we should always wonder, “Is the God of our belief or disbelief too small or too certain? Can this God we believe in—or don’t believe in—be put into a human-defined box?” If so, that’s not the God named “I am.”

3—WHO IS JESUS?

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, we find these same kinds of questions in the conversation between Jesus and Peter. In verse 13, Jesus had asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Then, in verse 15, Jesus rephrased the question, “But who do you say that I am?” It was true that Jesus fit into the Son of Man tradition that included John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets. But Jesus also identified himself with the “I am” of God’s very nature.

Verse 13 indicates that this conversation between Jesus and the disciples took place in the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi, where a temple to Caesar was built, and where Caesar was exalted as

divine. There's a very real sense that the question of Jesus' identity was intended to be a direct contrast to the identity of Caesar. So, when Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Peter meant that Jesus—not Caesar—was the one worthy of allegiance and worship.

4—WHO WAS PETER?

But this conversation wasn't just about who Jesus was. It was also about the identity of Peter. Of all the disciples present for this conversation, it was Peter who stood out and spoke up. According to verse 17, it was Peter who gave the answer revealed, not by human flesh and blood, but by God's heavenly self. Because Peter was in tune with God on this, Jesus pronounced that Peter was blessed. In fact, Jesus gave Simon the nickname *Peter*—which means *rock*—for it was on this strong foundation of faith that Jesus would build his church.

In verse 19, Jesus also told Peter that he would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, so that whatever Peter would bind or loose on earth would be the same in heaven. That means that Jesus gave Peter authority to make rules and offer forgiveness. Jesus was heading toward the cross, and he needed a successor to get the church up and running, to embrace life after death, to open the doors wide and welcome people in. So, who was Peter? He was the key-holding disciple who—according to the book of Acts, chapter 10—came to recognize that Christian faith and salvation weren't only for those who obeyed the Jewish laws, but also for the Gentiles. Peter's identity was being shaped as he followed Jesus, and his identity would be shaped even more as he would be led by the Holy Spirit.

5—WHO ARE WE?

In this sermon, I could have just focused on Moses or God or Jesus or Peter, but I thought it might be helpful for us to imagine a variety of ways that identity factors into our faith. Who we understand God and Jesus to be affects who we understand ourselves to be. Will we allow ourselves to hear the divine call? Will we believe that we are able? Will we trust that the God who calls and sends

also accompanies? Will we believe that we have the authority to carry out the work and responsibility that God has called us to do? Will we believe that Christ really can build his church on our faith?

I hope you know that these questions aren't just for those of us who have felt the call to ordained and professional ministry. These questions are for lay people too. And I'm not just talking about easy things. I'm talking about when God calls us to do something big enough and important enough that we say, "Who am I that . . . ?" And then we remember. Oh, yeah. I'm the one whom God calls, sends, and accompanies. I'm the one who knows that Jesus is the Son of the living God. And I'm the one who has the keys of authority to open the doors of the church so other people can also feel loved, forgiven, and empowered.

CONCLUSION

There's a contemporary Christian song called "Who Am I?" The lyrics go like this:

Who am I, that the Lord of all the earth
 Would care to know my name
 Would care to feel my hurt?
 Who am I, that the bright and morning star
 Would choose to light the way
 For my ever wandering heart?
 Not because of who I am . . .
 Not because of what I've done
 But because of who you are [Lord]
 I am a flower quickly fading
 Here today and gone tomorrow
 A wave tossed in the ocean
 A vapor in the wind
 Still you hear me when I'm calling
 Lord, you catch me when I'm falling
 And you've told me who I am
 I am yours (Casting Crowns, 2004)

Whether we're talking about Moses or Peter or you or me, we all have our questions and our doubts. But, in the end, the only question really is, "Who do we believe the Lord is?"—for the answer to that question is what will provide each of us an answer to "Who am I?"