

SERMON TITLE: "Serenity Prayer: God"  
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 3:1-8b, 11-14  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: February 21, 2021, at First UMC

*God, . . . grant me . . . the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
. . . the courage to change the things I can, . . .  
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Every year, the United Methodist Women's organization partners with our General Board of Global Ministries and comes up with something they call "Mission U." Mission U is a continuing education opportunity for United Methodist women and men who are interested in learning more about mission situations around the world, Bible study, social justice, and personal faith development. This year's option for personal faith development is called *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*<sup>1</sup> and is based on the Serenity Prayer. In this time when we've all been stressed by COVID-19, politics, protests, and riots, it seemed to me like this study could be developed into a helpful sermon series.

So, beginning today and continuing through this season of Lent, we are going to be focusing on the Serenity Prayer, bit by bit. Using various scriptures, we will explore the concepts of God, prayer, serenity, acceptance, courage, and wisdom. But, before we get into today's topic, let me say just a few things about the prayer itself.

There are many different versions of the Serenity Prayer. Some are much longer. Some versions put the lines in different order, or change some of the words. It's all good. For our purposes, we'll be using the version that we recited this morning, which is from our United Methodist hymnal.

So, now, we begin with the first word of the prayer, which is "God." Who is God? What is God? Why do we or should we believe in God? We could never explain God in just one sermon. But we have to start somewhere. So I chose the scripture from Exodus, chapter three, to help us ponder the Divine. Let's dig into this story of Moses and see if we too can come to a greater understanding of God.

### GOD REVEALED TO MOSES

As we begin reading this story in **verses 1-3**, we see that Moses' experience of God was prompted by the sight of the burning bush. This bush which was burning, but not consumed, was a **curiosity**. It was a **mystery**. It was something new and different, that Moses had not experienced before. That's why it caught his attention. It was intriguing and drew him in.

Today, we can't comprehend this burning-bush-that-was-not-consumed any more than Moses did. But the point isn't understanding the bush, is it? The point is that the bush was a symbol of the mystery of God. There are so many things about God that we will never be able to comprehend, so many things that are beyond our human understanding. And yet, this mystic mystery magnetically draws us in. The Divine is ever new and fresh and piquing our curiosity with something just beyond our reach.

Yesterday morning I read an article about a Christian online-gaming ministry. Talk about beyond my reach! I have absolutely zero experience with online gaming. But because the article spoke of the efforts of some United Methodists to reach out and share their Christian faith with young adults and youth in a new way, I was drawn, in curiosity, to read about their ministry. God is always doing something new. God is always finding new ways to catch our attention, to pique our curiosity, to draw us closer, to help us experience the mystery.

In **verse four**, we see another way that Moses experienced God. The God of mystery called out to Moses by name. So much of God is inaccessible to our human comprehension, but nothing about *us* is beyond God's knowledge. While the Bible is full of imagery referring to us as the sheep of God's pasture, we are not anonymous creatures in a gigantic herd roaming the earth. The relationship God wants to have with us is personal. God knows each one of us individually. God knows us inside and out, up and down, through and through. It's like the Psalmist prayed to God: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away . . . you are acquainted with all my ways" (Ps. 139:1-3). God knows us personally.

The next insight Moses had into God's nature is found in **verse five**. As soon as Moses responded to God's call, God told him to come no closer. God told Moses to take off his sandals, for he was now standing on holy ground. Yes, the God of mystery wanted to have a personal relationship with Moses. But, before Moses came any closer, he needed to understand that this would be no ordinary friendship or collegial relationship. Moses and God would not be equal partners or brothers. God and the spaces which God occupied were sacred. God and all that was affected by God were on a different plane than normal human and earthly life. God and God's things were set apart. They were different for a reason. They had purpose. God and everything associated with **God was and is holy**. God absolutely comes to us and catches our attention where we live, but God is more than our mundane existence. God is holy and calls us to enter respectfully and carefully into that sacred space.

The next truth Moses learned about God is found in **verse six**. There God told Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." In other words, God was the **Divinity of Moses' Jewish tradition**. Yes, God was revealed in the new and different curiosity of the burning bush that was not consumed, but God was no novelty. God was no passing fad or fly-by-night experience. God had been around a very long time, as proven by the generations of Moses' ancestors who had placed their faith in God.

This is important for us to hear. While we're generally becoming more accepting of other people's religions and spiritual beliefs, we have to be careful about not straying too far from the roots of our Judeo-Christian faith. A couple days ago I heard a radio interview about the new movie *French Exit*. In that movie a woman believes that her dead husband is reincarnated in a cat and that she can talk with him through a séance. Fortunately, that's just a silly fictitious movie. But what about the many Americans who now say they believe in the QAnon conspiracy? A new survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute and reported by Religion News Service indicates that "27% of white evangelicals" and "15% of white mainline Protestants" now "believe the widely-debunked QAnon conspiracy theory" that a certain leader "is secretly

battling a cabal” of cannibalistic pedophiles.<sup>2</sup> This QAnon belief was largely behind the violent insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6. What we believe matters. We need to stay rooted in our tradition and not go off on wild tangents. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of our tradition.

The next revelation about God is found in **verses seven and eight**. There God tells Moses that God has observed the misery of the people, heard their cries, and knows their sufferings. God is not only aware of their tribulations, but also has come to deliver them from the Egyptians and into a land flowing with milk and honey. In other words, **God cares about our human troubles and has plans to improve our life**. This reminds me of a verse in Jeremiah, where God was speaking to the Jews who had been overthrown and taken to Babylon as exiles. To those beaten, bedraggled, and sorrowful people, God said, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:11). No matter what misery we’re suffering, we can be comforted in the belief that God knows the trouble we’ve seen, and God has plans to help us.

In **verses 11 and 12**, we learn another characteristic of the Divine. Moses had heard God’s call to go to Egypt and rescue the people, and Moses doubted his ability to do that. God didn’t let him off the hook, though. Instead, God replied, **“I will be with you.”** Over and over again in the scriptures, we hear this assurance from God. God doesn’t give unfunded mandates or expectations without resources. If God says, “Go,” then God also says, “I’m going with you. Don’t worry about your limitations; you can do it because I will be with you.” Do you remember the angel’s words to young Mary about the birth of her special child? The angel assured her that she could do this because “nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1:37). And the angel who spoke to Joseph told him that the child’s birth would fulfill the prophecy “God is with us” (Mt 1:23).

The climactic description of God in this text is found in **verses 13 and 14**. There, when Moses asks God’s name, God replies, “Tell them that **‘I am’** has sent you.” “I am.” If we didn’t worship God for any other reason, we might worship God just for that amazing response. The Hebrew language here actually

can be translated in the present or future tense as “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be.” This response affirms the mystical and mysterious nature of God that we first talked about. It also affirms the sense that we humans can never pin God down to any one set of traits. For example, we can’t say God is our “Father” or “Judge” or “Rock” or “Shield” or “Shepherd” or “Savior” or “Son” or “Holy Spirit” or “Comforter” and think we’ve got God all figured out. God’s nature is open ended and infinite. There will always be more to God than we can imagine. Descriptions of God like “Cloud”, “Fortress”, “Fire”, “Wind”, and “Mother Bear”<sup>3</sup> are found in the Bible, and—as long as we continue to walk with God—more images will arise from our experiences. We will never be able to put a period at the end of the sentence of who God is, because God will be whatever and whoever God wants to be. And that’s what makes God in charge and not us. God is the great “I am.”

### **CONCLUSION**

For the offertory music that we’ll be hearing in a few minutes, Chris Green is going to play his violoncello. He selected a piece called “Song Without Words.” Many instrumental songs are like that. They don’t need lyrics. But I thought this song title was especially good for today. God is like a song without words: revealing Godself in new mystery, knowing us personally, guarding holiness, keeping the faith tradition, noticing our suffering and planning for our welfare, promising to be with us, and always leaving the door open to a new discovery of who or what God is and will be. We who believe in God will always possess some words of description and always be at a loss of words for what God will reveal next. But, for sure, as we seek a life of serenity, we begin with a belief in God.

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<sup>1</sup>Book edited by Erin James-Brown (UMW: New York, 2020).

<sup>2</sup><https://religionnews.com/2021/02/11/survey-more-than-a-quarter-of-white-evangelicals-believe-core-qanon-conspiracy-theory/>

<sup>3</sup>Hosea 13:8.