

SERMON TITLE: "Who Am I?"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 3:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 9, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several months, I've accompanied my 25-year-old adopted son Oscar to some medical appointments. Two different providers looked at the MRI of Oscar's back and said something like, "Whoa! You have a lot of spinal deterioration for such a young man. It must be genetic." Of course, as I sat next to my dark-skinned Colombian son who is much bigger than I am, it was fairly evident to those medical providers that they weren't talking about my genetics. I have been Oscar's mom for the past 19 years, and I certainly have had a lot of influence on his life. But I can't answer questions about Oscar's family medical history. Only as he lives out his life will Oscar be able to come to some ideas about what he inherited from his biological parents and who he is genetically.

In last Sunday's sermon, I addressed our human concern about knowledge. In this age in which terabytes of data are coming at us so fast that it feels like we're drowning in information, we also feel inadequate, like we can't ever know enough. And, yet, as our scripture from First John indicated last week, there are some important things we can know. We can know that that we're in a right relationship with God and God's children, we can know that we have the power to overcome sin, and we can know that we have eternal life. While we always need to remain humble and openminded, it's reassuring to have this spiritual knowledge.

Today, I want to address another kind of doubt we humans are prone to have. So I invite you to consider with me this scripture reading from Exodus 3. Let's use this story about Moses at the burning bush to ponder the identity question, "Who am I?"

1—WHO IS MOSES?

Since Moses spoke the words, let's begin with him. In a sense, Moses' question was rhetorical. In verse 11, when Moses said, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?", what he really meant was "I'm not qualified. Go find someone else to do this job." But maybe that's an even better place for us to start . . . because who among us has never had those kinds of self-doubts? Who among us has never thought we weren't up for the task, that we weren't able to manage the challenge? Or, even if we thought we could maybe or probably do the job, we still longed to have someone spell it out for us with some strong persuasion. We want someone—and preferably someone with integrity and authority—to assure us that we certainly do have the required qualifications and skills.

Over the 11 years I've lived in Utah, I've read a lot of articles in the news about how Utah is way behind other states in the percentage of female political leaders. Part of the problem, say the experts, is that, in the patriarchal state of Utah, girls and women have been socialized to stay in the background. Utah's men have grown up with the encouragement and confidence they need to throw their name in the hat. But Utah's women are more likely to need a mentor, a cheerleader, a promoter, even a whole team who will persuade them that they are the one candidate who is sorely needed and will be supported at this particular time.

Whether we're women or men, we've all had that tendency to hold back on occasions. As self-doubt reigns supreme, we ask ourselves, "Who am I?" Maybe we even voice that question aloud to other people. Like Moses, maybe we even say it to God.

Of course, we know how it turned out in the Moses story. God persuaded Moses that he was the guy. Moses was the one who had the abilities God required to rescue the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Born to Hebrew parents, Moses was the right one to save his people. Moses, who had been adopted and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, had learned a lot about the Egyptians.

Moses had been educated and trained in the ways of Egyptian society. Raised in the Pharaoh's palace, Moses had a sense of privilege that would allow him access to power. The current Pharaoh was likely someone with whom Moses had grown up, so Moses would have known how to approach and speak to him. Moses might have known the leader's strengths and weaknesses.

Of course, Moses was a normal human being too, with lots of self-doubts. Exodus tells us that Moses didn't speak well and was worried that he wasn't eloquent enough. We also know that Moses had killed one of the brutal Egyptian taskmasters who had made life difficult for the Hebrews. Even if Moses' action seemed justified to him at the time, the consequences forced him to flee. For decades now, Moses had led a quiet life as a shepherd in a faraway place. Why would he want to change that now and stir up his old troubles in Egypt? Why are you talking to me? Moses wondered. Why would you ask this of me, God? Who am I?

2—WHO ARE WE?

None of us is a Moses. God isn't calling us to rescue a whole people out of slavery. But we have certain situations in which God is tapping us on the shoulder and trying to get our attention. It may not be through a voice in a burning bush, but somehow, we hear a call or a whisper. God is asking us to do something important. God is asking us to do something for which we've been preparing by our life experiences and interests. God is asking us to help someone by using the skills and resources we possess.

Maybe for you, that means assisting with your grandkids. Maybe it means helping a neighbor repair their lawn sprinklers. Maybe it means taking on a new leadership role at work. Maybe it means taking someone to a medical appointment. Maybe it means serving on a community board or committee. Maybe it means teaching a class. Maybe it means taking a plate of cookies to a newcomer on the block or a casserole to someone who is grieving. Maybe it means building, sewing, or growing something. Maybe God is calling you to engineer and manage a big

project. Maybe God is asking you to speak up about your Christian faith. Maybe God is asking you to help bring peace and reason to a disgruntled relationship. Maybe God is asking you to donate money to an important cause.

I remember how I heard God's call to me late on a Tuesday afternoon—October 25, 2022, to be exact. I was here at the church, when I heard a knock on the glass doors. When I went to see who it was, there stood Yainier and Yusimi. In Spanish, they asked for help, and we began to have a conversation. We didn't understand each other completely, and a year and a half later, we still have trouble getting everything communicated correctly. But God had been preparing me for that day. Through my years of Spanish classes and mission trips to Latin America, through my family's adoption of Colombian children, and through my prayers to God about the struggles of immigrants—there they were, and there I was. God had given me Yainier and Yusimi as my immigrants to care for. And, of course, I quickly involved all of you.

3—WHO IS GOD?

Who am I to do this? I have asked many times. Who are we to do this? I'm sure you have asked too—especially as the mission grew from two people who were already here to include praying for and caring for other Cubans who are still suffering in that country or are enroute, as Maikel was for seven months.

But like Moses, we have never been alone in this or any other calling. Maybe you noticed that Moses had another question besides "Who am I?" Moses also asked God, "Who are you?" The identity question of this story isn't just about the person who is called to do ministry. The second identity question is, Who is behind this calling? Who is the authority who asks this of us? Who is the one who gives credibility? Who is the one who empowers? Who is the one whom others will recognize as legitimate? Who is the one who makes this mission possible?

God's answer to Moses is famous for its mystery. "I am who I am" hardly tells us anything. And yet, God's answer was perfect, because it leaves open so many possibilities. Nothing about God is closed off or limited. The only thing Moses' people needed to know was that the same God who had led their ancestors was still leading their people. God had not disappeared. God had not abandoned them. God had observed their misery in Egypt and was now ready to do something about it. God planned to go with Moses to do this job. God was alive and at work among them, and God had plans for their future and their well-being.

In case Moses might not get the point, God was calling him to do holy work. The burning bush which wasn't consumed was God's way of saying, "Look! There's a lot more going on here than you can understand. Take off your sandals and respect this sacred thing that's happening. This spiritual call to action won't be easy. But you don't need to worry because this is holy business and because 'I am' is the one sending you."

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? . . .
 Not because of who I am . . .
 not because of what I've done
 but because of who you are [Lord]
 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.*

If we're ever wondering, "Who am I?" the answer is clear. We are called by the God who values our life experiences and skills, calls us to do God's important and holy work, and promises to be with us. Our self-doubts fade away when we allow God to answer the question "Who am I?".

*Lyrics by Mark Hall, c. 2003 Be Essential Songs.