



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
August 30, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

Please be in prayer for Marjorie Brown, who asks for prayers for healing following hip surgery.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The God of our ancestors calls us to worship.

Praise the Lord!

Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

Let us worship God!

OPENING HYMN

Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty!

#1

CALL TO CONFESSION

Trusting in the power of God to save, let us confess our sins before God and one another.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Holy God, we confess that our love for you and for others has not been genuine. We have not held fast to what is good, and we have lagged in affection for our brothers and sisters. We have not been patient in suffering, nor have we persevered in prayer. Forgive us our sin, free us from fear of the power of evil, and help us trust in the power of your everlasting goodness; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Friends, hear the good news: Christ has broken the power of sin and evil and has opened to us the way of eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

By the power of your Spirit, O Lord, make your Word become a joy to us and the delight of our hearts. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 105:1-11

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth. He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance."

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 3:1-15

Moses 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. There 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. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When 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." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He 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.

Then 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, and 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. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He 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." But 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?" God 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.'" God 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.

SERMON

"Holy Moments"

Rev. David Ukropina

The lectionary text for the sermon today comes from Exodus chapter 3, verses 1 through 15, and it includes the familiar story of Moses and the burning bush. Now even though this is a very well-known Bible passage to all of us, I was surprised to realize it is not one I have ever preached on before.

I take it as a given that all of Scripture is holy, but in a special case like Exodus 3, not only is the passage holy, but the subject matter is holiness as well. We are familiar with this story, but it is worth reorienting ourselves with both the narrative and the details of Moses encounter with God.

As we remember, the story begins with Moses tending the flock of his father-in-law in Midian. The passage then tells us that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames from within a bush. When Moses sees that the fire does not burn the bush up, he goes towards the bush for a closer look.

Then God calls Moses from within the bush, saying his name “Moses, Moses.” It’s interesting to note here that the name Moses means drawn out, from when he was drawn out of the Nile as a baby, and here again, Moses is drawn out of his everyday life by the appearance of God, and he will later help draw out the people from the Red Sea.

Moses responds to God’s call by saying “Here I am,” to which God tells him, “Do not come any closer” and to “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” God tells Moses that he has seen the misery of his people in Egypt, and has come to rescue them from the Egyptians and bring them to the land God promises.

Moses then begins the first of his many objections, in saying “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” When God tells Moses that he will be with him, Moses then asks God that if he does in fact go to the Israelites and they ask him for God’s name, then what should he tell them.

God again responds by say, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. ‘I am’ has sent me to you.” Now commentaries have had much to say over the centuries about God revealing God’s name, and what it means. In other parts of the Bible, God is called Lord, El Shaddai, or Abba by Jesus. But in this text, we have God naming God’s self.

The words God uses have been translated as “I am” or “I am that I am.” This is also where we get the word Yahweh, which comes from the Hebrew word hayah, which could be translated as “he who is he” or “I am that I am.” The King James Bible rendered this same word as Jehovah.

In ancient times, the name Yahweh was considered so holy that it could not even be spoken by the Israelites. When we read the word Lord for God in the Old Testament, that is a kind of substitute for the unspoken name of Yahweh. Again, the sense here is that God’s name was so holy that it should not even be spoken.

As I was researching and preparing for this sermon, I also had a chance to read about Reformed and Presbyterian tradition in connection with the burning bush story. As early as the 1500’s, French Calvinists adopted their motto as *Flagror non consumer*, which means “I am burned but not consumed.”

To this day, the symbol for the Reformed church in France is a burning bush. The motto of the church of Scotland is Latin for “Yet it was not consumed,” an allusion to the burning bush, and which goes back to the 1600’s. The burning bush is also used as the symbol of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, which uses the motto “Burning but flourishing.”

One could argue about the meaning of all these phrases. Some have suggested that they speak to the reality of the church suffering through the centuries but nevertheless continuing in its life, mission, and existence. It could also be understood as saying that God remains with the people, and so they are not consumed.

For me, the main message I take from this passage about the burning bush and the mysterious name of God is that whatever God is, God is holy and mysterious and completely beyond our human ability to understand the majesty and holiness and mysteriousness of the existence of God.

Now of course, God has revealed himself to us in appearances like those in this text, and most importantly, through the historical appearance of God in Jesus Christ. And yet at the same time, there remains something inherently mysterious and transcendent about God, something that will always remain, to some extent, beyond our ability to fully understand.

We can see this in the story itself, and the way the bush is on fire and yet not consumed. I've seen attempts to explain this phenomenon, such as a certain kind of plant that can easily become enveloped with flame. However, explanations like these seem very unconvincing to me and to most scholars.

The sheer mystery of a bush that burns but is not consumed also resonates with the sheer mystery of God's name. Even though a lot of names are given to God in both the Old and New Testament, there is something about God that always goes beyond us and our attempts to name or sum up God.

Notice in the New Testament how many names there are for Jesus. At different times, he is called Lord, master, Emmanuel, teacher, Logos, the son of man, the son of David, the lamb of God, rabbi, and yet none of these names can ever fully sum up or capture either the nature or reality of Jesus.

It's interesting as well that throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently uses "I am" statements to describe himself. He says, I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, I am the light of the world, I am the living water, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the resurrection and the life. And he also says, "Before Abraham was, I am."

The Greek phrase here for "I am" is *ego eimi*, which connects back to God calling himself, "I am." It's interesting that when Jesus calls himself "I am," the Pharisees around him charge Jesus with blasphemy and that he was making himself equal with God, which was true. Jesus was knowingly and intentionally equating himself with God in using these words.

As with the Exodus passage about the burning bush, there is something so interesting about this "title" for God and for Jesus. In a way, it is not a title at all. It's not really a noun at all. It's more like a verb. It's more like God, and Christ, mysteriously pointing to themselves and saying I am existence itself, and I am mysteriously beyond all human grasping and conception.

This reminds me of an interesting exchange I recently had with my younger brother. He is not religious, but in a brief email that I got out of the blue, he asked me if I knew the name for an architectural term for the very physical center of a church interior. As this is not something they taught us in seminary, I did some reading, and combined it with some things I already knew.

I wrote back and mentioned to him that the center of churches was often in the meeting point between the transept and the nave, which lie crosswise to each other, and architects had often used this as a visual focal point, such as when someone might build a labyrinth there, or place something else of significance at that point.

However, as much as I read, I could not find any actual word or term for this precise point. He emailed me back, and I still remember his response. He said something to the extent of it seemed fitting that something so mysterious would not actually have a name. I agreed with him about this, and I feel now that it applies to the burning bush and God's name as well.

Now usually towards this later part of the sermon, I try to ask the question of "So what?" or "What does this have to do with us," or "What should we do about this?" I often, though not always, ask this question, as I try to avoid sermons or messages that are nice in themselves, but have no bearing on our lives.

And in this case with the text, it would be easy to look at the call narrative of Moses, and say to all of us that we are all called to follow God, and should take that calling out into the world. Now while I agree that we are all called, not just official religious people, I've decided to focus less on the calling and action part, and remain longer with the mysterious and transcendent part.

I'm doing this partly because I believe all of us, at one time or another, have had an encounter with God, or have had God speak to us. Now you may be saying, God has never spoken to me from a burning bush, or blinded me on the road to Damascus. Still I think everyone has encounters with the holiness of God.

None of these have to be big transcendent, dramatic moments. They can be experiences of God's

presence just in small ways in every-day life. We can meet God in worship or in a Bible devotional or in prayer or in small everyday encounters. Or they can happen in big moments like the birth of a child or a dramatic moment in the outdoors somewhere.

In previous sermons, I've mentioned a sense of God's presence that I had when I was giving our two year old child a bubble bath, and things just suddenly got so quiet and holy that I was overcome by the presence of God. I've mentioned a mountain top experience, and a time when as a chaplain, I entered the room of a dying patient, and I almost heard the words, take off your sandals, you are standing on holy ground.

Yet even though I think we all have these experiences, we often don't talk about them or else we discount them or forget about them. I think this is partly true because there is something so mysterious and holy about the presence of God that it is hard for us to both take in and hang on to in our memory.

Still, I think it's important for all of us to try to reconnect to these experiences. It's important because it reminds us of important things. Remembering holiness reminds us that God is real, that God exists, that God is personal and knows us by name, and that God continues to be involved with our lives.

So please take some time this week to reflect upon and remember the holiness of God. Maybe that's in remembering a holy moment from your past. Maybe it's in prayer or a devotional. Maybe it's in watching the steam rise from a cup of coffee in the morning as you are just starting your day.

A remembrance of God's holiness can help us in many ways. It can help us remain humble in our opinions, knowing that however much we think we know, it's never the complete picture. It can help us be on the lookout for other moments of God's mysterious presence in our everyday life, which can enliven us and keep us rooted in the basis for our faith.

The great French priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote that "the world is filled and filled with the absolute. To see this is to be made free." May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

In peace, let us pray to God.

We pray for the church. Bless the church, deliver it from evil, and make it holy in every way, that all people may see the light of your salvation through the witness of your faithful servants...

We pray for teachers and ministers. Help them proclaim your holiness and righteousness, and to practice your

mercy...

We pray for the world and its leaders. Uphold leaders of governments. Give them sound judgments and merciful hearts, and lead them to do what is right in upholding the common good...

We pray for the earth. Let it be a gentle home for us. Help us heal its destruction, that life may flourish and every creature rejoice in the goodness of creation.

We pray for children. Bless them and those who care for them. Defend them. Enable them to thrive in mind, body and strength. Give them parents and guardians who are faithful in their duty to provide for their needs and guard them from danger...

We pray for the sick and those in distress. Health those who are sick in body, mind or spirit, and uphold those who support them in their need...

These prayers we offer through Christ, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

The God of Abraham Praise

#49

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. -Genesis, 31:49