

I Am Who I Am

Exodus 3:1-15

When Wendy and I were away on our week's vacation, we enjoyed ourselves indulgently on a remote island on Lake Champlain near the Canadian border. Not having been to Isle la Motte prior to our arrival, I imagined it to be entirely removed from civilization, out of touch with the larger world so that we could get our inner selves rested and our bodies refreshed. For the most part, I found that to be true.

What I didn't expect is how far away our imaginations would travel from human civilization that week. The land upon which our little 230-year-old stone cottage stood was adjacent to a marble quarry that was now preserved through a land trust. What we discovered was this quarry was part of the Chazy Reef—the oldest known coral reef on the planet, containing fossils dating back 480 million years! Paleontologists from around the world come to this island to study the fossil remains of gastropods and geologic striations of rock that contain evidence from the most ancient forms of life on earth. So we became amateur fossil hunters while taking the dogs on their daily walk.

A mile or so away was an even more interesting island trek on the Goodsell Ridge Preserve. At first impression, this was merely a field with various outcrops of ledge rock that contained additional fossils and fascination for me. However, the walk was set up as an educational exhibit of the five billion years the earth has evolved over time from stardust. It was a mile-long odyssey, each of the 5,280 feet representing a million years, and every hundred steps an

informational panel described the state of the earth at that particular time. The exhibit is called, “A Walk Through Time”—a project organized and funded by Hewlett-Packard and several other scientific and educational foundations. Though they have been shown around the world over the last decade or so, there are three of these “Walks through Time” in permanent exhibit—one in Asia, one in Europe, and this one on Isle la Motte in Vermont. I found this exhibit to be so full of compelling and interesting information, I downloaded the app for it on my I-Phone for future reference.

When we finished this mile-long trek about the earth’s formation, we expected to find some reference to human civilization, marking the beginnings to the present. And reference there was, except that with each foot representing a million years of existence, humankind was limited to the *final one-one thousandth of an inch*—so infinitesimally small, it was impossible to visually portray it! Needless to say, I made sure Fusco didn’t decide to leave his mark at that spot out of respect for all the saints and sinners who have ever occupied the earth!

Seriously, it’s hard to imagine how insignificant we humans are relative to the overall history of the planet, let alone the known universe and the expanse of time. Our meager minds can’t adequately grasp the distance between stars, never mind the entire cosmos! I can only echo the sentiments of the Psalmist who looked into the glory of the night skies and exclaimed, “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”—an expression of pious reverence, but also speaking to the heart of our amazing evolutionary existence!

Who are we that we even matter? Who or what is this creative force that brought into existence all that is known and unknown? Astrophysicists and philosophers can debate the ultimate cause of the origins of the Big Bang, but as people of faith, can we even begin to fathom the greatness of the Creator, if in fact there is such a being beyond the stretches of the human imagination and the dark mass and energy of the universe?

It's an important discussion within our society as to how we teach our children about the origins of the world and human civilization. Even as we hold onto a belief in God as ultimate reality and Creator, it's hard to argue against the theory that life unfolded over millions upon millions of years as an adaptive measure from the elements that made up the primordial "soup." In many ways, the evidence that scientific study uncovers and postulates merely inspires wonder over its beauty and complexity, rather than contradicting the role and place of God. Yet, the religious and the non-religious will argue to the end of time over whether this all came about by accident or through the creative guidance of a divine Presence.

No one really knows, which is why you and I make our claims about God in a thoughtful, yet very modest manner—as a matter of faith, as a measure of meaning, not as an irrefutable, undeniable fact. We believe because our sensibilities lead us to this perception; for many of us it's harder to imagine the meaning and relationship within all of life without some magnificent Mind and ultimate purpose behind it.

Our thoughts of God are generated from a deep human yearning for making sense of what exists, giving each act of nature or

human choice purpose, cause, and value. Faith is that indefatigable desire within us to make sense of this existence we call life.

That said, most of us grew up with what we assumed was knowledge of God long before we ever were introduced to Darwin, empirical science, and inductive logic. The stories we heard as children in Sunday School or elsewhere of a divine Being were shaped by the experiences of our households, religion, and culture. We generated in our imaginations an image of God in whatever way seemed appropriate to us (e.g., a grandfatherly figure with a benevolent presence, a gentle, guiding shepherd of our soul, a stern tyrant ever ready to call us into account and judge our fate, a nurturing mother reaching out to hold us close with comfort). Our conceptions of God were and are only human perceptions, not much more. The evidence of what God is like comes from within us or from some religious authority or teaching. Given the insignificance of human beings in the overall scheme of nature and time, it's rather presumptuous and narcissistic for us to conclude that human beings are at the center of all that exists or would know all there is to know about God—the creative life force and Spirit behind everything that exists—when we can't even grasp the entirety of what makes up the cosmos.

That's why modesty is appropriate in our claims about the divine Presence, because no one is in the position to define God ("revelation" notwithstanding). That may seem strange to say because we assume religious thinkers like preachers and theologians are supposed to provide some definition to God. Certainly, a range of opinion exists across religions, cultures, and the spectrum from

Fundamentalists to atheists as to what God is or is not like and what God plans for humankind. We're used to perceiving God with some definition—some description—theological or otherwise.

To be honest, what it comes down to for most people is that they hold a view of God that, when examined closely, will likely reveal some image or concept out of their own life experience, or at least reflecting a need or desire within them. In other words, we resonate with images of God that are already familiar to us or that project something we feel we need in our lives.

What I mean is, if any one of us tried to describe in detail what we thought or believed about God, in all likelihood we would use similar terms that would describe a parent, a mentor, a friend, or some other figure, real or imaginary, in our life. You might test that a bit, exploring in your own life who matches up with the perception you have of God, albeit in an imperfect way. There's nothing wrong with that; again, that's how we communicate, by using familiar language and images. What this often means is that the great and unknowable God of the universe—the powerful creative force of the cosmos—is typically reduced, downsized, and conceived of in human characteristics as the perfected form of the human image we have already stored in our minds. Or to put it another way, *Imago Dei*, or the image of God, is merely the image of what's already in the human heart.

I see it in my own perception of God. I'm drawn to an image of God that appeals to me with a character that is generous, wise, merciful and just—a comfortable presence, open to everyone—a reconciler, one that is fair and who cares about underdogs and those

who are victimized in life. I'm turned off by conceptions of God that are high and mighty, self-serving and capricious, angry, bellicose, and judgmental, punitive and harsh. Why is that? Probably because what I love about God are those characteristics that I admire in people, particularly those who have mentored me, whereas the unappealing traits are those that I reject in others. Do you see what is happening? My image of God is shaped by what I want God to be for me. For that reason, I want to put some definition on God. Therein lies the problem. I am limiting God to what appeals to me personally. We all do it.

Perhaps that is why the Hebrew conception of God is so insightful and revealing—a notion that was discovered through a name for God revealed to Moses in our lectionary text for today. What we find here is more than a name; more than anything, it's a portal into another sense of reality which, though ancient, fits in quite well with our scientific discoveries about the origins of the universe and Earth. To summarize, what Moses was discovering was that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not just a tribal god with limited power and value, but was the divine Presence beyond definition, control, and human understanding—indeed, the God of all gods (which explains the first two of the great commandments).

First, this was disclosed in a blazing fire that raged yet did not consume the bush—an image that could never be repeated in nature and clearly was outside of the bounds of human experience and explanation. Second, when Moses asked for a name, what this Spirit should be called, the divine Presence responded with what amounts to an enigma—I AM WHO I AM.

This name is actually a four-letter word made up of consonants that in English is typically rendered Yahweh, or Jehovah, and when we see it in our English versions is translated “Lord.” Scholars will note that it comes from a particular tradition within ancient Judaism which has its own theological motifs. But the concept as a perfect present tense—I AM WHO I AM—conveys limitless presence, relaying a sense that God is who God is—God is defined not by a name or by human characteristics, but revealed by what God does. I AM WHO I AM (or the Great I AM) relates a sense that in every moment, God is. God is present in the moment, which changes every second and with every life—something that is akin to a life force that permeates all existence, human or otherwise.

A third and very striking point in this passage is that this divine Presence—I AM WHO I AM—is entirely integrated into a sense of who human beings are and is fully interactive with them. Let me explain. When Moses heard God speak to him out of the flaming bush, he responded in the way the name of God would be revealed to him momentarily: “Here I am.” Or was it, “Here, I AM.” Or was it both?

For the storyteller it must have been an intentional play on words—something the writer of the Gospel of John also did with Jesus (“I AM the bread of life”, or “I AM the Good Shepherd”, or “I AM the resurrection and the life,” etc.—was it Jesus referring to himself, or was he alluding to God as the Great I AM?). Or was it both—intentionally ambiguous? Could it not mean that in Jesus’ life and in his personal consciousness, God was revealed as God is disclosed in any of us? The name, I AM, expresses this interactive

relationship: human beings and God are interrelated in who we are and what we do.

You see, the name, I AM, is intentionally ambiguous for the reason that human life and the divine Presence are so completely interactive and integral to each other, that we can truly say that we are in God and God is in us. As I am present in every moment of my life, God is also present in every moment of my life. “I am who I am” may refer to each of us individually, or it may refer to God apart and distinct from us in other people and life forms, or God within us. The name makes it impossible to know with any certainty; there’s a dynamic ongoing fluidity that defies definition, as much as a definition would limit God, claiming God is here and not there, or God is in this person but not another, or in this religion but not that religion. No one can make that determination or judgment, for God is all and in all! This makes it more comprehensible, then, to declare that the God who speaks to our hearts and inspires our spirits is the same One who is the ultimate source beyond the energy and mass of the universe. The name keeps things open and unknown.

At the same time, this divine name provokes the most significant existential questions we can ask ourselves: Who am I? I am who I am. I am a product of my DNA, my upbringing, my cultural environment, my reason, my experiences, my dreams, my choices, my actions, and my will. God is sometimes revealed in who I am and sometimes not by virtue of the things I do and the impact I have on those around me or in how I make use of my existence and life.

That’s why the name of God—I AM WHO I AM—expresses our morality and our ability to have a conscience and accountability for

our actions. The name of God inspires self-reflection: I am who I am, but I am also better than I am (inspiring improvement to our characters), or as the case may be, I am something worse than I truly am (recognizing our sinfulness and fallibility). It's a profound interactive, integrated sense of spirituality and morality between the divine Presence and humanity.

Now I realize this seems very complex or abstract. If you're like me, you probably never knew so much was in a name. I suppose Moses wouldn't have grasped who and what he was encountering when he went up on the mountain to make sense of a bush raging in fire that would not be consumed. Nothing made sense—the experience was far too magnificent, too strange, and out of the norm. But at the same time, he came to experience this divine Presence intimately and felt it as a powerful moral voice within him, enough so that he conveyed a faith that continues to inspire our own consciences and spirits—a living force that will interact with us each day of our existence. Who is this One who is beyond all things known and unknown? It is the source of all being, who is within us as well as beyond us!

Honestly, I have to find myself there theologically if I'm to believe the God I pray to and who holds my life together is the same Presence that set off the Big Bang over 13 billion years ago and created the evolutionary flow of life that produced gastropods and other creatures now imbedded in ledge rock. It's a profound thing to ponder on a walk through time with a couple of dogs pressing to keep pace a million years each step. This is what faith calls for—a belief in a divine Presence that somehow keeps all of this together, woven with

purpose, meaning, and interrelated for good. Though my lifespan is too short to be noticed, it feels good to sense that to God, who make all things happen, it still matters.

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