In the story we just heard of Moses’s encounter with God on Mt. Horeb, we find two of life’s great questions. And, by seasonal implication, we have found two of Lent’s great questions. Moses, when confronted with something bigger than himself, and something that demands something of him, was thrown back to an elemental question: “Who am I?” Equally important, of course, was the identification of Who, or What, it was that is summoning him. These questions then translated into questions of vocation, but the fundamental questions with which Moses had to deal were “Who am I?” and “Who, or What, is calling me?”

Like most of us, Moses had to struggle to learn who he was. In his case, of course, the struggle, the confused identity, was more challenging than we might be able to suppose. Here was a young man who, at the age of three months, took a river journey in a papyrus basket. He was found by a princess of another people and was raised in that royal household. Since, according to the story, his own mother was able to act as his nursemaid, we can only imagine the confusion of growing up betwixt two cultures—receiving the benefits of the ruling class while nurtured by a part of the oppressed class. To which people did he belong? Who was he?

At some point, Moses witnessed the Hebrews’ harsh working conditions that, because of his papyrus-boat journey, he had escaped. He saw a Hebrew worker being beaten by an Egyptian and he acted. Whether it was because of an innate sense of justice, or outrage over the treatment of a kinsman we aren’t told. All we are told is that Moses killed the Egyptian and hid the body. When he learned the following day that his action had been seen, he fled Egypt and settled in Midian, in northwestern Arabia. There he married a Midianite woman and had a son— in short, he identified with yet a third people. Who was Moses now? Hebrew? Egyptian? Midianite? Royalty? Slave? Fugitive? Shepherd?

Then came that fateful day when Moses was out with his father-in-law’s sheep on “Horeb, the mountain of God” (Ex 3:1). An angel appeared to him in the form of a burning bush. Moses’s curiosity compelled him to see the thing and he got more than he expected. From the bush came a voice summoning Moses to take on an immense challenge—that of leading Moses’s own people—out of their bondage in Egypt. And Moses asked that existential question, “Who am I? What are my qualifications to do this thing that you are asking of me?” The answer was pretty oblique. Rather than say, “Moses, this is who you are...,” the voice (the voice the text identifies as God’s) simply said, “Moses, I will be with you.”

As would probably be the case with most of us, Moses wasn’t satisfied with this answer. Indeed he wasn’t sure he wanted any part of this mission—this fulfillment of who he, Moses,
was. Moses pointed out that he was a nobody (Ex 3:11), that no one would listen to him (Ex. 4:1), that he hadn’t been a success as a public speaker (Ex. 4:10). To all of these objections, there was a consistent response: “I will be with you. And I’ve got some snazzy tricks that might help convince your listeners.”

God may have believed that Moses’s audience might be convinced, but Moses himself was still a little uncertain. Chiefly, he wanted to know who it was that was summoning him away from the pastoral—sheep-herding—life he has adopted. Several times, in different ways, he asked the Speaker “Who are you?” God responded, over and over, “I am the Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” God also asserted to be the God of deliverance, and a God of miracles, the God who was the creator. And, finally, God told Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

It took a while, but finally Moses was sufficiently convinced to take leave of his father-in-law and Midian, and to return to Egypt. Only this time in Egypt, Moses knew who he, himself, was and Who it was who had brought him back and commissioned him

This search for self-identity, as well as the search for God, is found throughout Scripture. Moses’s sojourn in the desert is mirrored later in Israel’s own wanderings. Forty years of searching for identity! And even after that length of time, and after entry into the promised land—that is, a land that promised identity—the Israelites still couldn’t be true to who they were. The prophet Isaiah, when called by God (Is 6:1-7) confessed/admitted that he was unworthy: “Who am I? Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips!” God had an answer for that, and in the process gave Isaiah a pretty good idea of who it is who had called him. A similar problem is found in Jeremiah’s call (Je 1:5-8). Despite God’s assertion of divine involvement in Jeremiah’s destiny, Jeremiah protested, “I’m only a child.” “Who am I?” And God reiterated, “You are who I have created you to be! And I will not forsake you.”

And, or course, in terms of biblical examples of searches for identity, we have Jesus’s own desert experience and his temptations by Satan. Jesus had to recognize that he was not simply a wonder-worker, that he was not the ruler of the world on the world’s terms, that he was not going to distrust God’s own purposes. Through his desert experience, Jesus came to know who he was and what it was he was about. And Luke writes that, after the devil left him, “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...” (Lk 4:14). Once Jesus knew who he was, and, presumably, who was the God who had sustained him in the desert, he was filled with the Spirit, the active presence of that God, and was able to assume his life’s work.

These two questions, “Who am I?” and “Who is calling me?”, are inextricably related whether we see it or not. To know the answer to the first gives a good indication of the answer to the second. And those answers lead to the answer to a third question: “What ought I do?” That is, questions of identity are bound up with questions of vocation. The problem is, however, that we frequently by-pass the identity questions in favor of the vocational question.
The vocational question is that one we often hated to answer as children: “What do you want to do when you grow up?” Or, as it might be put to college students, “What’s your major?” Or at cocktail parties, “What do you do?” The assumption underlying these questions is that we are what we do. That seems, by biblical witness at least, to put the cart before the horse. There, in the Bible, the assumption is rather we should do what we are—and that assumes we know who we are, or, to use language from Frederick Buechner that I’ve quoted before, we need to what is our “deep gladness”*, and then to act out of that.

Moses had to come to grips with who he was—and who God was—before he could tackle Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt—that is, before he could take up his life’s task. Jesus had to struggle past his identity demons before he could return to Galilee. Even the poor fig tree this morning—in my reading of the parable, the owner says, “You are a fig tree! Fig trees bear figs! Be true to who you are; you may be surrounded by vines, but be a fig tree! I will see that you have what you need. So, bear fruit! Or you aren’t worth the ground in which you’re planted!”

Lent is a wonderful time to slow down and take stock of who we really are— not just what we do. Many of us have used a variety of tests or surveys to try to get an “objective” picture of who we are. I think, particularly, of the Myers-Briggs Temperament Analysis or the Enneagram for individuals. In terms of Good Shepherd, the congregation has taken the “Spiritual Life Inventory”, and in the next couple of weeks, we’ll take the US Congregational Vitality Survey. The point is not how we arrive at the answer, but that we do arrive in discovering—in Buechner’s words—our “deep gladness”.

Reflecting on who we are, however, is only half of the battle. Reflecting on Who is calling us forward is the other half. Our Lenten summons to read our Bibles, to engage in prayer and meditation, to participate in corporate worship—all of these give us a better idea of Who it is who calls us. Who are we? Who is our God? With answers to those questions—both individually and corporately—we may gain a better perspective on our work of setting God’s people free from their many and varied bondages. This is the other half of Buechner’s definition of vocation: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”**

May the remainder of our Lenten pilgrimage be full of burning bushes, challenging questions, discernment of Who it truly is who summons us, and a glad and grateful acceptance of our mission.

Amen.

** ibid.