

# Burning Identity Questions

*A sermon on Exodus 3: 1-15 & Matthew 16:21-28 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 September 2023*

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## Message

Our true identity is only found when we discover that it is not about us, but that we are only truly anyone in relation to the God who is everything, and who is not the opposite of anything.

## Sermon

You often hear about people having identity issues or identity crises. Who am I? In last week's gospel reading we heard Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" In tonight's first reading we heard Moses asking, "Who am I?" And then we heard him asking God, "Who are you? If I'm going to tell people that you have sent me, who will I say has sent me?"

And we hear God giving the rather enigmatic answer, "I am who I am. Tell them that 'I am' has sent you." Which of course Moses knows is not going to be a very satisfying answer to anyone. It's not even something you can actually say in a grammatically understandable sentence, so how is it going to even make sense to anyone, let alone quell their doubts and fears.

Despite the curly identity questions and the bewildering grammar, this story of Moses encountering God in the burning bush is a well known favourite. Moses was quite the man for an identity crisis.

You'll remember the story we heard last week about his birth and the various women who, without really having any idea of the story they were participating in, made it possible for him to survive when Pharaoh had decreed that he, and every other male Hebrew baby was to be drowned in the Nile River. And you'll remember that the result of these extraordinary events was that not only did he, a male Hebrew baby, live, but he grew up in Pharaoh's household as the adopted son of the Egyptian princess.

So you've already got a bit of an identity crisis brewing there, haven't you? One of those classic nature versus nurture identity questions. Am I one of the Hebrew slaves, or one of the slave-owning Egyptian ruling class? Well that question was put to the test when, as a young man, he saw an Egyptian slave-driver viciously bashing a Hebrew slave, and suddenly Moses is all Hebrew fury and the Egyptian is dead.

But the Hebrews don't applaud him. Far from it. They see him as bringing serious trouble down on their heads, so they distance themselves from him quick smart. So now he is cut off from both sides of his heritage. Neither side wants him. Both reject him.

But identity questions can wait. For now he's running for his life. He gets himself well out of the reach of both groups, and before long he is married to the daughter of a Midianite priest, and is looking after the family sheep flock out in the wilderness. The text says that on the day of the burning bush incident, he had led the flock "beyond the wilderness," which suggests that he was very much in uncharted territory in every sense of the word. Just the place for a major identity crisis.

So, there he is, beyond the wilderness, and we're told that he was on the mountain of God, although Moses didn't know that yet. Something strange catches his attention – a very small bushfire. Just one bush in fact. And as he watches, he realises what is most strange about it. You'd think a one bush bushfire would be over fairly quickly. There is not that much to burn. But this one just keeps going, and the bush doesn't seem to be getting burned up. What's going on? Moses turns aside for a closer look. And as soon as he does, God calls to him out of the fire, "Moses. Moses!"

"Here I am," says Moses. Remember those first words of Moses. They'll be significant in a moment. "Here *I* am." Who? I. Me. I am.

"Come no closer!" says God. "Remove your sandals, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And God continues, "*I am* the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses, who had turned aside to look, hid his face, for he was now afraid to look. But sure enough, the fire goes on burning, and the bush is not destroyed.

I may be going out on a limb here, but I think it is not insignificant that this fire of God burns without destroying anything. In fact I think it is even significant for our questions about identity. You see, for many of us, when we think about the identity of God, about who God is, what we quickly begin thinking about is who and what God is against. The God who hates this, and the God who opposes that, and the God who destroys the other thing. And very often, we follow suit and define ourselves by what we are against. We are the people who are against those kind of people.

We define ourselves by what we reject. We are the people who are united in rejecting those people who are trying to get in across our borders and take our jobs. We are the people who have rejected that view of the Bible and the people who hold it. We are the people who reject those people who have corrupted the church. And we rather look forward to God destroying them.

But if we take Jesus seriously, and if we take the sign of the burning bush seriously, then we may begin to see that we have got it all wrong. Jesus wouldn't even reject and define himself against those who were nailing his flesh to the cross. And the presence of God, although it appears to Moses as fire, is a fire that doesn't destroy anything, even that which it is burning. A confounding symbol indeed.

Whoever it is that you thought, or perhaps hoped, that God was going to destroy, this God destroys nothing and no one. This fiery God certainly purifies and refines and communicates and sometimes terrifies. But even those who get too close and are engulfed in this purifying fire discover that it is a fire of love and that nothing and no one is destroyed. We will burn for sure, but not be consumed or destroyed.

This God is not defined by being against anything, but by being ablaze with fiery love for everything. Everything is gathered into this love, and in the fire, our true identity is revealed, and we are not destroyed. And if we are to be true to our identity that is forged in the fire, we too cannot burn against anyone, but only blaze with love for all as our God does. No wonder Moses has to take off his shoes and hide his face.

From the fire, God speaks to Moses again saying, “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 slavery, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Now this is already startling news. It was widely assumed that either God was dead or powerless, or that God had rejected the Hebrews and was against them. How else could you explain their abandonment to slavery. Clearly their God had either failed to keep them out, or had actually deliberately condemned them to slavery. Again, a God who is defined by being against someone, but no. Not so. God is compassionate and is definitely for the downtrodden, and is coming to the rescue. And when God embarks on a project, God chooses and prepares someone for the task. “So come,” says God to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Now for Moses, who was not the least bit popular with either the Hebrews or the Egyptians, and who thought he was out here beyond the wilderness minding his own business to keep well away from the both of them, this sounds like anything but a good idea. And it plunges him straight back into his identity crisis. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” “Who am I?” Remember just a minute ago it was “Here I am.” Now it’s “Who am I?”

Now for those of you who are language and grammar geeks, what we have got going on here in the Hebrew text is the beginning of an elaborate word play on the verb “to be”. It doesn’t work so well in English because “I am”, “You are” and “I will be” don’t sound very obviously alike, even though they are technically all conjugations of the same verb. But I’ll do my best to convey some of it.

In response to Moses’s anguished “Who am I?”, God replies, “I will be” - same verb again - “I will be with you.” And then God gives the rather unhelpful promise that “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.” Or in other words, you have to go through with the whole thing successfully before you are going to get the real sign.

But Moses said to God, “If I go 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?”

There is a small, but in some ways helpful uncertainty in the translation of the text there. I’m told by the language geeks that the phrase “What is his name?” could also be “What can *he* do?” Which is a pretty obvious question to ask, isn’t it? The God of our ancestors is the one who either sent us into this mess, or was powerless to prevent it, so what can he do? Or what is his name, which in the context amounts to much the same thing. Identity. Who is he, this God you are talking about? “What answer am I going to give them?”

God answers Moses saying, “I AM WHO I AM.” Here we are, back in this elaborate word play again. “I am who I am.” Or it might be “I am who I will be”, or “I will be who I am being.” Hebrew verb conjugation is not very specific, so it might have any of those nuances, or all of them. Both Hebrew language and Hebrew theology rejoice in illuminating ambiguities. And God said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Now this word play is fundamental to the picture of God's identity that the book of Exodus is painting for us, and for its picture of our identity. So just where is it going? We've begun with Moses fairly confidently identifying himself, "Here I am," but then fairly quickly being reduced to "Who am I?" And then God being questioned about "Who are you?", gives this impossible answer, "I am who I am, or will be, or am being" or something. And it does several things.

God's identity is very much tied up with existence, with the very nature of 'being' itself. "I am the one who is" might be another possible translation. So this is a God whose being is experienced as presence - "I *will be* with you" - and as a very in-the-moment kind of being. This is not a God who can be relegated to the past or the future. "I am." "I am being."

And this is also a God who can't easily be spoken of as any kind of thing or any kind of being that we actually know how to speak about. When you try to say "I am has sent me," it doesn't actually create a valid meaningful sentence. It breaks the language and leaves us unable to say what we thought we were trying to say about this God. This is not a God we can merely speak about. This is a God who speaks us. This is a God who can't ever just be someone or something we talk about. God is always closer than that, closer than 'being' itself, closer than a fire that engulfs us but does not destroy us. We don't get to have polite discussions about this God. Instead we are spoken into being and into action by the word of this God.

Which brings us back to Moses's identity crisis, because Moses is trying to define himself - "Here I am" in relation to this God, but he is discovering that you can't really do that. Even that language won't allow it. You can never find your real identity by starting with yourself and trying to define yourself and then locate yourself in relation to this God.

You can't say, "This is who I am, and this is what God means to me, or this is what place God has in my life." God doesn't occupy any place in your life at all. You occupy a place in God's life. God's life and God's identity always come first, and who you are will only ever be found within them.

Moses is trying to say "Here I am", but God is simply overriding that and saying "I am" and "I will be", and the only answer to Moses's "Who am I to go to Pharaoh" question is "I will be with you", or in other words, "You are simply the one who is with me, and apart from me, you are no one to go to Pharaoh, or even to go home to your wife at the end of the sheep herding day." God is the centre, the one who is, and we only are because God is, and we only are as expressions of who God is and of all that God loves and all that God is doing.

Now I realise that all of that might sound like a bit of a complex word puzzle, or a kind of grammatical tongue-twister or mind teaser, but don't think of it as something you have to solve. If you try to solve it, you will be back to trying to figure out a God out there somewhere, instead of allowing the fire of God to engulf you and burn with love all around and through you. Surrender to it more as poetry and mystery than as a logical puzzle to be unravelled.

In the end, it is saying pretty much the same thing we heard Jesus saying tonight: "if you want to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it." Your life is not about you. Your identity is not about you. And when you try to make your life and your

identity all about you and your search for your true self and all that sort of stuff, you end up becoming little more than a sad parody of a human being.

The true you will be found and will blaze brightly when you give up trying to build or defend a 'unique self', and model yourself on Jesus and on the one who can burn without destroying anything. Your true self, and the destiny for which you were created exist only in God and as an expression of God and are found, as Jesus is found, in giving your self away for the life of the world. In such self-giving, seen so clearly in Jesus, we blaze as brightly as the sun, and all is love and nothing is destroyed.