

## LENT III

*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.'" Exodus 3: 13*

Here is one of the great moments of salvation history. God tells Moses who God is. But what is God saying? I talked last week about mystery, in particular the mystery of the covenant that God makes with Moses, which was our portion of Hebrew Scripture then. And here the mystery continues. ***I AM Who I AM.*** What can this mean? Does this get us anywhere in our understanding of the God of the Israelite, our God? Or does this inscrutable, apparently redundant statement simply deepen the ambiguity surrounding the Holy of Holies?

Our Jamaica Plain Clergy group meets monthly, rotating among our various church homes or, in this case, the rectory. Whoever hosts the meeting is responsible for leading a teaching or reflection before we do our other business. Several months ago, when we met at Temple Nehar Shalom, on Lochstead Avenue, our teaching was provided by Rabbi Victor Reinstein, who founded this house synagogue. Like all rabbis, at least the ones I've known, Victor is a serious scholar and a marvelous, inspirational interpreter of scripture, and I always learn a great deal from him.

At this meeting, today's reading from Exodus had been the portion assigned for that Sabbath, and Victor taught us about it. Here's what he said – as he kindly recreated for me in an email when I wrote him this week.

In Hebrew, the name that God gives to Moses by way of introduction is formed of the words, "Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh," which literally means "I Will Be That Which I Will Be." In both Biblical and modern Hebrew, "Ehiyeh" is simply the first person future. It is not so much about God being Who God will be, but being that which we need God to be at different times and moments in our lives, our need and awareness at a given time or stage opening us to see aspects of God that we didn't and could not have seen before. As God becomes, so too do we. Similarly, God's most holy name, usually and most unfortunately translated as "Lord", is formed simply of the letters of the verb "to be," not actually a word in itself and as such neither masculine nor feminine, simply the letters of being. So in God's image may we continue to become.

I was excited by this revelation last fall, as I'm excited again now. This teaching is so rich – there's so much to explore here.

Let me begin with some remarks about Lord. As Victor writes

*Similarly, God's most holy name, usually and most unfortunately translated as "Lord", is formed simply of the letters of the verb "to be," not actually a word in itself and as such neither masculine nor feminine, simply the letters of being.*

Many of you will have noticed that I do my best to eliminate “Lord” as a designation for God in our liturgy. It is the title *Lord*, and the masculine pronouns for God, that I most often change as I work on the bulletin for the week. We ask readers to read from the bulletin, not from the big lectionary book, so that what we hear will reflect what is in the bulletin; so that what we hear will not repeat, over and over, that God is Lord and that God is male.

After all, the issue of gender aside, what do Lords have to do with us? We don’t have lords in America. The founders were very clear that they wanted a republic with elected officials, not a system of hereditary rule. And the designation of *Lord* conjures up something even more objectionable than, say, the continued artifact of the House of Lords in England. *Lord* suggests not only hereditary privilege but also a feudal system of domination, oppression, and exploitation, everything that the great I AM, and Jesus, stood over against.

And then, *Lord* is inescapably male. And resistance to naming, and thinking of, God as male is not confined to radical feminist thinking. Early in my tenure here I got a note ( this was pre email, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth) – I got a note from a parishioner saying, “I’m always more comfortable when I don’t have to hear about God the Father. Thank you for banishing him from our liturgy.” This was from a man, a straight man, and a loving, devoted father. I never knew the whole story, but I presume that his relationship with his own father had been difficult, if not abusive. And that, sadly, is a not-uncommon story for both men and women.

As some of you know, my grandfather abused me sexually when I was a little girl. I repressed these memories for many years – until I was 40, in fact – I recovered the memories the summer I was ordained a priest, and I’ve often wondered about the connection. In any event, I eventually told my mother what I had remembered about her father. She blurted out, “Well, of course he did it to me too, that’s why I’ve always had trouble with God the Father.” She never said another word about this, but that one sentence spoke volumes of misery and accommodation.

I make a point of all this because I know that, for some people, changing the words of scripture or liturgy is a risky, unwelcome business. But we all read scripture selectively, and we all are troubled by certain aspects of liturgy. And while I respect and

value tradition, and understand how comforting and sustaining the familiarity of liturgy can be, I am also sensitive to the time- and culture- bound aspects of both scripture and liturgy. And I resist being held captive to nostalgia about *the way thing were*, when the *way things were* no longer reflects our theology or contemporary society. I think we cannot call ourselves a progressive parish if we refuse to modify our liturgy or scripture readings to reflect our values and convictions.

Neither scripture nor liturgy is an idol. We don't worship them. We worship *I AM who I AM*.

So, enough of that, and on to the good part.

*It is not so much about God being Who God will be, but being that which we need God to be at different times and moments in our lives, our need and awareness at a given time or stage opening us to see aspects of God that we didn't and could not have seen before. As God becomes, so too do we.*

God will be that which we need God to at different times and moments in our lives. As our beloved Gretchen would have said, "How great is that!" It's great, and it also may be perplexing and scary. It puts me in mind of another interchange I had with my mother, which lodged firmly in her mind and heart, and which she writes about in her journal. I said to her, *I don't need a friend right now. I need a mother*. She never said what provoked me to this remark. I imagine her saying that she was trying to be my friend, and my rebuking her.

At least I was clear, rude, but clear. And my mother, bless her, was able to hear me and try to provide what I needed, even after I must have hurt her feelings.

Can we possibly imagine having conversations with God that go like this? Most of us, surely, have had such conversations with someone- if not a parent, then with friends, or most probably with partners. "I don't need you to do this, I need you to do that." If we can ask mere human beings, limited as we all are, to meet our needs, how much more might we ask God, the holy of holies?

Of course, we don't always get our needs met, no matter how often and how nicely we may ask. Some years after this interchange, I said to my father that I needed help paying for my daughter's college education. The answer there was, *nope, not going to happen*. What he actually said was, *I put on that hair shirt for five children, and I'm not doing it again*.

And man, can I imagine God saying that to much of what we ask for! As we've all heard about prayer, the answer may well be *no*.

But what's exciting and critical here is that thinking about what we need God to *be* is much different from thinking about what we need God to *do*. It's a scarier prospect, in many ways, or at least a more daunting one, because it asks us, it requires us, really, to engage in some profound introspection. What we need God to be, who we need God to be, demands that we know who we are. When I asked – or told – my mother to be a mother, it was because I needed to be a child, at least in relation to her. And I don't think it meant that I needed to *act* like a child- I was in my 30's by then, with a child of my own. But I needed to *feel* like a child, I needed to feel that someone would love me unconditionally, and, for while, I suspect, uncritically and undemandingly.

And now that my parents have both died, I'm nobody's child any more, nobody's but God's. That can be a very sad and lonely feeling at times. But after all, I'm in my sixties, and I was blessed to have my parents as long as I did. And I rarely need to feel like a child, nor to imagine God as a parent. More often I need God to be a confidante, a listener. I need God to be someone to whom I can bring a problem, in prayer, someone with whom I can share my troubles and find some relief from the burden simply by sharing. I need God to be a companion in struggling for justice and equality.

Sometimes I need God to be all loving and compassionate, and sometimes I need God to be all filled with righteous indignation at the world's evils. But isn't it more accurate to say that I need to understand that that's what I need God to be at a particular moment in time? Because, we believe, God has the capacity to be loving and compassionate, a righteous judge and warrior for justice, all at once – and to be so much more, as well. Does God change, or do our needs change? The latter, I think. As Victor wrote, *our need and awareness at a given time or stage open us to see aspects of God that we didn't and could not have seen before*.

We grow, we change, and we encounter different dimensions of God as we progress in our spiritual journeys. But that doesn't mean that our early images of God necessarily go away. Sometimes we'll always yearn for a nurturing parent-God, and, with grace, we will find that God at our hour of need.

We must also recognize that not only do our own needs and awarenesses change over time, but also our culture's awareness evolves. If somebody with the insight, wisdom, and authority of the Hebrew prophets, or of Paul, were writing today, I do not think they would write down that God wants women to be quiet in church, or that *men*

*lying with men* is an abomination. The cultures of those times and places needed to believe those prohibitions, and needed to believe God sanctioned them. But we don't need to believe that – at least, not here at St. John's we don't, and not increasingly in the wider culture.

I know that for some people these reflections will be discomfiting. Sometimes we just need to nail God down, to have God be clearly defined and, as the theologians say, *impassible*. We do not always welcome ambiguity and mystery into our busy and stressful lives.

But, my dear friends, the world is filled with ambiguity and mystery. And our call is not to deny ambiguity or to turn away from mystery, but to embrace them as the heart of the holy mystery, the great all-encompassing heart of I AM who I AM.

Amen.