

A sermon preached on August 30th, 2020 based upon Exodus 3:1-15 entitled “The Great I AM”.

I want to invite you to go with me in a little flight of fantasy. Let's imagine that God sends to us our very own guardian angel – think, Clarence from 'It's a Wonderful Life', just not so clumsy, more mysterious -- who leads us through a time portal, back 3000 years to a certain patch of wilderness at the base of a mountain in a place once known as Midian. There we find a shepherd leading his sheep, a man of about 60, his skin well-worn by many years working out under the sun.

At first glance we are struck by how utterly ordinary the man seems, one of billions of human beings who have walked upon this planet we call earth, one of millions of shepherds who have herded sheep.

Nothing extraordinary here – a self-perception the man himself will shortly share.

Now imagine our angel transports us through that same time portal allowing us to witness something of this ordinary man's backstory – something like the mysterious “life review” people are said to undergo as their life on earth draws to a close.

We go back sixty years to the man's birth far off in the land of Egypt. We witness how by all rights he shouldn't have survived his infancy – all the other male infants of his tribe – the Hebrew people – are being slaughtered under order of the ruler of the Land. He survives their fate through a mysterious series of events involving the bravery and compassion by a handful of seemingly insignificant women.

Not only does the baby survive Pharaoh's evil extermination policy, we witness that he is also rescued from the extreme burden that was the life in those days of the Hebrew people -- a bleak life of severe impoverishment, working to the point of collapse as the slaves of Pharaoh. Because of the kindness of an Egyptian princess, he grows up in the royal palace, in the lap of luxury, never worrying about where his next meal would come from, and given access to the finest education of the day.

We witness also how mysteriously in those very first years of his life he is blessed to have his birth mother serve as his nurse maid. We watch as several times a day she tenderly holds the boy to her sucking breast, pouring out her love for him, whispering into his ears the ancient stories that shape the Hebrew people, stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the God who blessed them to be a blessing.

We watch this early part of his story play out and we are struck by how this seemingly ordinary man has been the object of astounding good fortune, that a man with such a back story has great reason to feel blessed.

And yet as our angel allows us to see other parts of the man's story, we see also elements of extraordinary pain. We witness the day when his birth mother's services as a nurse maid are no longer needed because the boy is to be weaned to eat exclusively solid food, and without warning she suddenly disappears from his life. As time passes his memory of her dims, but in the depths of his heart he grieves for her. The stories she whispered in his ear haunt him.

Our angel guide permits us to see what others around him cannot see: that as he grows up learning to walk and talk like the refined Egyptian prince that others see, underneath there is a profound emptiness, a feeling of not truly belonging.

He begins spending more and more time outside the palace walls, quietly seeking connection with his roots. He witnesses the oppression that the Hebrew people routinely suffer under, and it deeply disturbs him.

We watch as one day he comes upon an Egyptian taskmaster cruelly beating a Hebrew slave, and a rage the man didn't know himself capable of rises within him. No one, it seems is watching so he allows his rage to have its way with him. He strikes the Egyptian with such force that the man is killed.

Stunned by the brutality that he has committed – the fact that he has just taken another man's life -- he quickly buries the body of the Egyptian in the sand.

Disturbing as this incident is, the man realizes the beginnings of a vocation forming inside him. He yearns to be of service to the people he has come to recognize as "his" people. He realizes that the privileges he has benefited from – his education – the influence he can exercise as an Egyptian prince – put him in a unique position to help his people in significant ways in their quest for freedom.

The very next day following the murder of the Egyptian, however we watch as the man comes upon two Hebrews fighting one another. *They can't be fighting one another – don't they realize they must come together to fight for their rights?!*

He will show them the way. From what he has witnessed, one of the two Hebrew men is in the wrong in this dispute, and he tries to point out the error of the man's ways. But the man turns to speak coldly to him: *"What? Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian yesterday?"*

A whirlwind of emotions rise up within him.

Rejection. The people he longs to connect with don't seem to want to connect with him. They aren't interested in his offer of help.

And fear. Overwhelming fear as he realizes the murder he has committed was not hidden -- that in short order he will be a wanted man. Pharaoh will demand his life as payment for the life he has taken.

We watch as he flees out into the wilderness, thinking to himself, *"I'll leave and never come back. I'll put it all behind me. I'll go far away and start a new life."*

And so he ends up in the land of Midian.

Once more we watch as the man is blessed with good fortune. He comes to the local watering hole, where he witnesses an attractive young woman attempting to lead her father's sheep to the water only to have the sheep driven away by the local town bullies. The man's instinctive sense of justice rises up within him, and he sends the bullies packing allowing the woman to water her sheep.

It turns out that the father of the young woman is a man of some influence in Midian – he owns a large herd of sheep and serves as the priest of the local religion. The man ends up marrying the woman, and working in his father-in-law's sheep herding business. His wife bears him a son.

Outwardly it would appear the man has finally found the sense of belonging he has always yearned for except... except for the strange name he gives his son: "Gershom" which means *"stranger in a strange land."* The sense of disconnection and inner emptiness persists.

We watch as time passes and the man settles into the routines of life. And so the angel brings us back to where we began, watching a now sixty year old Moses herding sheep, doing what he has done now for close to forty years.

The journey our angel has taken us on leads us now to see this seemingly ordinary man with quite different eyes, does it not?

I've taken such care with this flight of fantasy because I would invite you to contemplate a similar angel led exploration of the back story that has brought you to the present moment – a back story largely hidden from others, a story hidden to a great extent even from yourself. Only God knows and understands the whole story. What might such an intimate review of your life reveal?

The lives of each of us, no matter how seemingly ordinary are in fact great holy mysteries, each distinct and yet each a similar weaving together of threads of blessing and burden, grace and brokenness, much of which is long forgotten.

Beyond all odds, Moses survived his infancy, and yet I would suggest to you that similar sense of wonder would be appropriate to the fact that any of us find ourselves alive. Is it but chance that we find ourselves on this particular planet so uniquely positioned of all

known planets to sustain life in such complexity? Was it but chance for any of us that against all odds one particular sperm cell out of billions succeeded in implanting itself in a particular egg with the result being we are alive with our absolutely distinct combination of DNA?

Though much of it is largely forgotten, there is grace and blessing in each of our stories - - love in a myriad of forms poured out to nurture us on our journeys.

But the stories of each of us also contain what seems like the opposite of blessing: experiences of grief, and rejection, and depravations of all sorts.

In the lives of each of us there have been foolish choices made that caused great suffering, as well as choices made with little comprehension of what we were doing that have rippled forward in blessing.

All of this – the seeming good and the bad – is woven together in the lives of each of us – and in every person we encounter – in what amounts to a holy mystery – a sort of burning bush if you will before which we would stand in awe -- if we but have the eyes to perceive it.

And throughout this great weaving this greatest of all mysteries – the one we clumsily refer to as “God” -- has always been quietly present, and at certain burning bush moments this holiest of mysteries catches our attention in such a way that some sort of message breaks through to us.

Perhaps it was when we witnessed a child be born. Or maybe when we stood out under a clear sky far from electrical lights and gazed up to ponder the wonder, the beauty of all that is and intuiting that this all didn't happen by chance, that there is a mysterious love that undergirds all of creation.

If you can recall such a moment, perhaps the answer given to Moses in response to his request for the divine name seems right -- “I AM WHAT I AM” – a peculiar name for sure but one that asserts the utter mystery of a God we cannot control, cannot attempt to turn into our personal bell hop, and yet whose deepest nature is a love we are called to trust, and who out of this love gave us the gift of life.

Like Moses, God calls each of us by name, whispering in our ears that we are standing on holy ground -- to take off our shoes so that our feet may feel the good and holy earth. As God assured Moses, this is the same God who moved behind the scenes in the lives of our ancestors, blessing them with the intention they be blessings to others.

With his attention captured, God assures Moses that the cries of the Hebrew people have not gone unheard. And in those moments of holy awe we sense too that God knows well the burdens each of us have carried – the suffering of every single person

who has walked upon this earth and God cares – and God is quietly at work to set the captives free.

And we have a part to play in the great liberation. Knowing the particular weaving of burden and grace, giftedness and frailty that is the mystery of our lives, God knows the distinctive ways we are equipped to be a blessing – a balm for the wounds of others.

God gave Moses a mission, and God does the same for us, and as Moses shrunk away from the call and claim of this mysterious I AM upon his life, if we are willing to acknowledge it, there are also deep feeling of inadequacy within each of us that get in the way of our responding to God's particular call upon our lives. But the mysterious I AM's answer is the same as the one given to Moses: "Fear not, I will be with you, and that is all that matters."