

Who Is God?
 A sermon by David Roquemore
 First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
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Exodus 3: 1-15

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, in question 4, “what is God?” The answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” That answer came, by the way, in a prayer, as the divines adjourned for dinner. After debating how to answer this question all day, they asked one of the members to pray, and this is what he said: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

As we look at this passage today, we see echoes of some of that. We often look at Moses, what he did, how he felt, how he acted. But if we look to see what we can learn about God, we see some things too. God, we learn, is holy, is relational, and is with us.

I. God is holy — other.

What does it mean for God to say he is holy, that the ground on which Moses stands is holy? Why must Moses remove his shoes?

The ground is holy because here God reveals himself. Here God is manifest. Here there is a *theophany*, which is the fancy word for God revealing himself. And there are those who suggest that, anytime God reveals himself in the Old Testament, it must have been Jesus who was revealed, for the Son is the one who comes to us and is made manifest to us. However you want to read that, know that here on this ground God is known.

God’s holiness means that God will not tolerate sinfulness. God cannot sin, and does not like it when we sin. Is God angry with us? Does he want us to be punished for our sins? No, I think God is not angry so much as deeply saddened; God wants us to be healed, cleansed of our sins. God wants us to be holy, as he is. God wants us to be separated from the rest of humanity, and healed of the sickness of our sinfulness, so that we can be the people he created us to be.

God is other; that means, God is not like us, not one of us. God is not a human being made perfect. God is not some extra-powerful person. God is different, other. Someone said once that God is “wholly other” — that is partly the meaning of holiness. God is separate, set apart from us, made known to us in his difference from us.

Philosophers have argued that if God were truly “wholly other,” and not like us in any way, there would be no way for us to communicate. Perhaps that is true. I can conceive of beings who arrive from outer space who cannot communicate with us at all. Happily, God can and does communicate with Moses, and with us.

II. God is present and relational.

God calls to Moses. Moses sees the bush that burns but is not consumed. Incidentally, I know a man who was stationed in the Sinai as an Army soldier, and says that the people there directed him to a very old, scrawny little tree, which they claim is the actual bush that Moses saw burning, where Moses encountered God. Who knows?

Anyway, when God calls him, Moses turns aside. This is his calling, his vocation. Moses is called by God and given a mission, a direction. He is to go and tell the Pharaoh to let the people of the Hebrews go free. Moses is to rescue them from slavery. Moses speaks for God. That is what God calls him to do.

We might stop and ask what God is calling us to do. What is God calling you to do? It may be different from your day job. It may be something totally new — Moses was a shepherd, not a political leader. It may be something spectacular, or again, it may be something quiet that few people notice. Whatever God calls you to do, you must do.

We all have a calling, in our baptisms. We all have something that we are equipped to do as part of the Church of God. We are all called to be faithful to Jesus, and to use our gifts to do his work. Whether it is grand and “up front” or modest and in the shadows, we are called by God to our particular work.

God calls the congregation to certain ministries, and those change over time. We see them changing as time goes by. At the Session meeting, we began to study a book written by George and Beverly Thompson, who work for our Presbytery, and who were here several weeks ago. They visited the day of the AWE service; they were amazed at how good it was and how worshipful it was. At any rate, in their book, they talk about these very themes, about how congregations grow and change, how the ministries to which we are called can change with time.

Let me give you an example. For ten years, we had Room In The Inn each time it got bitterly cold on a winter night. Then came COVID, and we had to stop doing that. After COVID, you will recall, I got ahead of myself and sent word out that we would do it, and of course, the mission committee said, “Think again!” Well, our inability to host it did not make the weather any warmer! Pastor Sherfey down at the Methodist Church got some people excited and willing, and they host it now. I am OK with that — the homeless still get to be warm, and two congregations are following God’s call faithfully. We look for additional ministries to come our way as things change.

God has called Brandon Burns, our organist, to another position. I am not sure what this might mean for us, but the Session is considering the possibilities. As with anything, we faithfully seek what God is calling us to do at this moment, even though we may not be able to conceive or understand what that call will be.

I served a church once where the Session got excited about doing something new to reach the unchurched. They decided after a good bit of study to begin a contemporary service. As it happened, we had the musicians in the congregation, and so we went

forward. We found the money, we enlisted a lot of people, and we did it. Twenty some years later, that church still has the contemporary band playing on Sundays! You would never have expected this stuffy old Presbyterian Church in the Midwest to change like that, but they followed what God was doing.

I said God is relational. God relates to Moses, and Moses argues with God. I am not sure I am the one you want to call to this work, God. I can't do a good job. God says, "nonsense, Moses! You will do just fine." A few years back there was a book titled, "Here Am I, Lord — Send Aaron!" That is essentially what Moses says to God before this conversation ends. But God wants Moses to lead the people. God calls Moses to this work, despite his objections and doubts. So never try to say no to God — if you are called, the only response is, "yes, Lord!"

God relates to us, and wants to relate to you. In Jesus Christ God comes close to us. Jesus wants a relationship with you. Now, that doesn't mean necessarily what we often think of when we say those words. I am not calling you into some evangelical pattern. But think: the word "evangel" in Greek means "gospel," and in German it refers specifically to "non-Roman Catholic" churches. That is us — a non-Roman Catholic Church that preaches and promotes the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's not surrender the words to the evangelicals. We *are* evangelical, in the correct sense of the word.

III. God has a redemptive purpose and invites Moses to participate.

God is willing to enter into the suffering of God's children. This is different from the other gods whom people worship. The gods of the people were often bloodthirsty and cruel, seeking subservience. People were scared of them. The God of the Hebrews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is different. This God calls people to him, and enters their world in a way that seeks to serve and not to be served, to be someone who is with us, who suffers with us, even who dies for us!

This God called Moses to lead the people out of Egypt into the wilderness, where he went before them. This God suffered with his people in their wanderings and their wondering. He was with the people when they were oppressed, and when finally they took the land that he promised them. God brought them home and made covenant with them to be their God.

God is willing to enter into the sufferings of God's children. This happens most clearly in the Incarnation of Jesus. Jesus comes into the world to deliver us from sin the way that Moses delivered the people from Egypt. God did it, but used Moses in a particular way. Jesus does that with us. We are called to be a part of his work, with Jesus Christ as our guide and leader, our model.

What this means is, no matter what you are suffering, God is there in the midst of it with you. God understands and knows the pain and difficulty of our suffering. In Jesus Christ God has experienced suffering, experienced human life in all its hardships. In Jesus Christ God is with us. The same God who called to Moses, who freed the Hebrews from slavery, who was incarnate in Jesus Christ — that same God is with us even now.

Thanks be to God! Amen.