

September 2, 2017
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Exodus 3:1-15

Who am I and I AM

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” Moses asks, “Who am I?” Despite seeing a bush that burns without being consumed, despite hearing God’s voice directly saying that he’s the one for the job, despite these two seemingly compelling arguments (if he sees it and hears it, why doubt what it says?) still, this is what Moses says in response: “Who am I, that I should do this?” Why the self-doubt?

Eventually Moses did go to Pharaoh, on behalf of the children of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, who were in bondage in Egypt, in slavery, in misery. Moses was at the forefront of one of the most formative moments for Jewish people: the Exodus, the event after and from which came religious laws and observances and identity. But that’s not where we find Moses today. Today he doesn’t think he can do it. Why the self-doubt?

Moses had an auspicious start in life: as a baby he almost died, but he was rescued, and then had what must have been a relatively comfortable upbringing. But then Moses reached early adulthood and things got more complicated. In a storm of anger, in a righteous passion for justice he took a step too far, got in trouble with the law, and ran away from home. He managed to create a new life for himself in another place, got married, settled down, ended up working for his father-in-law. Maybe Moses was middle aged at this point, there in the middle of Midian, minding animals that didn’t belong to him. Maybe it wasn’t what he dreamed he’d do: manual labor working for his wife’s family, but maybe that’s who he was. Maybe that’s why, despite the convincing audio and visual signs from God, Moses said “Who am I?”

Notice that God doesn’t answer that question. Or rather, God’s answer isn’t an explanation of who Moses is. Rather, God replies, “I’ll be there with you.”

But Moses is still unsure, Moses asks, in what can only sound like yet another dodge, “But who should I say sent me? Who are you?”

With Moses, I’m really interested to hear what God will say next. There’s a sense of build-up to it, dramatic tension, excitement, God is going to say who God is. What’s it going to be? And the answer is, “I AM WHO I AM.” That doesn’t sound like an answer at all. That just sounds like God is repeating the question. God continues, “Say I AM sent you.” Oh, ok, got it. What is that even supposed to mean?

I’m not the only one who’s exasperated, though. God is. God has just called Moses in truly spectacular fashion, offering an incredible opportunity, rescuing him from the midlands of life and a lost sense of self, and Moses keeps deferring, dodging, even presumes to question God’s credentials. I may be reading between the lines here, but I think God’s patience wears a little thin at this point. “Who am I?” God says, “Whomever I choose! I AM WHO I AM,” which can also be translated, “I will be what I will be!” God says, “I am what is. I am the God of existence and being and doing. I am the God who does things. I’m the God who sees human misery and responds. I’m the God who was with your ancestors, and as I’ve said I’ll be with you. Now go do what needs to be done. I’m calling you to do it.”

In less than two months, along with many others throughout the world, we will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a formative event for the Lutheran church and the Catholic church, too, and far beyond it as well—the Reformation had enormous technological and literary and economic and social and political effects, some trace to the Reformation the roots of modern democracy. A man named Martin Luther was at the forefront

of it. As the son of a mine owner, Luther had a comparatively comfortable upbringing, was able to be sent to school to become a lawyer. Things got complicated for him when, as a young man, he ended up in a lightning storm and made a passionate decision to run away to a monastery. Young Martin might have settled into life as a friar, but for a burning bush moment he had when reading the book of Romans. In the book of Romans, and in many other places in the Bible, Luther heard God's voice speaking directly to him, Luther heard grace. Luther heard God's voice telling him, "It's not what you do, it's who I am." That's grace, not what we do, but who God is, for us.

Did Luther have self-doubts, before or after that? He certainly had a complicated, even tormented inner life. But of one thing Luther had no doubt: who was in charge, who was the ultimate agent, who was the one making all this happen. Martin Luther famously said: "I did nothing." Luther preached this in a sermon in Wittenberg, the second in a series On the True Way of Reform. About midway through this sermon on reform Luther says, "I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, (that is a direct quote from a sermon, "while I drank Wittenberg beer") ... the Word did everything.

It's a remarkable quote, not just because Luther links together the gospel parable of the seed that grows while the sower sleeps with the sharing of a cold one with friends, which is worth its own sermon: the mysterious holiness of what happens at the pub table... why we need to rest from our labors... But for the purposes of this sermon I find this quote from Luther remarkable for two other reasons: First: for all that Luther opposed the highest religious authority of the day, and for all the force of Luther's formidable personality, Luther affirms that opposition should not be done with force. The first part of this sermon on reform is all about this, about how love must never use force, or harshness, or constraint. That's not the way of faith, that's not the way of true reform, Luther says. The other thing that I find remarkable about this quote, in which Luther says that he did nothing, the Word did everything, the other thing that is remarkable: clearly Luther was doing things, he lists them, teaching, preaching, translating. But Luther knows ultimately it's not up to him, nor comes from him. God is the one who does it. God wants him to use the gifts he has, which are given from God, to do what he does, to do what God wants and will be done.

There's an old Hasidic story about this, you might have heard it before, maybe even from me, but it's a fitting ending for today. The character in this story is a man named Zusya, a Jewish teacher, a rabbi. The story goes like this: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the world to come, they will not ask me 'Why were you not more like Moses?' Rather, they will ask me: 'Why were you not more like Zusya?'"

Not why were you not more like Moses. Not why were you not more like Martin. Why were you not more like you? Why were you not more like who God made you to be? God has called you. God will be with you. God the I AM, will be with you. Will you go, and do what God calls you to do? Will you go, and be who you will be?