

**St. Mark's, Niagara on the Lake**  
**The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'A' (proper 22)**  
**3 September 2023**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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**CALL ME BY MY NAME**

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Carl Jung once said, "The malaise of modernity is soul sickness." He believed that only when we have a proper sense of the infinite, and recognize it as the source of meaning and change, can we hope to truly know ourselves. Only when we encounter the infinite in the midst of our own lives can we hope truly to be ourselves.

We see this play out in the story of Moses and the burning bush. Now, most people would be content to look at a wildfire from a safe and practical distance, but wouldn't like to get too close. Seeing is one thing. But going to look is another thing altogether. So this encounter tells us something about Moses' fundamental character. You'll notice that the scripture doesn't tell us that the bush was burning specifically for Moses, nor does it tell us anything about how long the bush had been burning. All we're told is that when Moses draws close to it, he hears the voice of God speaking to him. He encounters God.

Now, that in itself is hugely significant—can you imagine? But something of greater significance happens when God calls Moses by name. He asks, "Who are you, Lord?" and God replies, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and at that moment Moses learns who he really is. He learns that even though he was raised in the palace as a prince of Egypt, he is, in fact, an Israelite—the son of a slave. Yet if he hadn't gone to investigate this strange sight, he wouldn't have ever found out who he was.

But all this—the divine voice, the revelation of personal history—seemingly isn't enough. Moses wants more. He wants to know God's name. In the ancient world, to know the name of the god—or, for that matter, the demon—you confronted meant you had the power to hold onto it, to summon it, obligate it. Which is why God doesn't give his name but answers mysteriously by simply saying, "I AM WHO I AM."

It's difficult to translate the original Hebrew since it has multiple meanings. It could also be translated as "I will be who I will be," or maybe "I am existence itself," or even "I am all possibilities." Thus, who Moses is is reflected in the reality of who God is, and the potential for his life is enabled by God who contains within himself all possibilities. So I think the point of the story is that in encountering God, we encounter ourselves. We discover who we really are. We see beneath the surface of our persona.

The American composer Samuel Barber's cantata for solo soprano Knoxville: Summer 1915 is an elegiac work which looks back from an adult's perspective on the seemingly carefree days of childhood when everything was simple and comfortable, with adults shielding their child from life's complications. But the music tells us that there is a truth beyond comfortable nostalgia, and there's a person yearning to be known—and seen. It builds to an intense and impassioned climax where the soloist sings of the adults who "Quietly treat me as one familiar and well-beloved in that home but will not now, not ever, tell me who I am."

A few years ago, a movie came out with the intriguing title of *Call Me By Your Name*. I didn't get it—especially since it was about coming out and being seen and known. "Shouldn't it be Call Me By My Name?" I wondered, especially since we've called ourselves all sorts of unattractive names for a long time: unattractive, undeserving, unlucky, unlovely. Yet here's a story in which God says I AM WHO I AM. And we are who we are. But to know that liberating truth—especially in the wilderness of this present life—we must go and look at that burning, divine mystery. For when we do that, we walk away from the soul sick notion that needing to find out—and embrace—who we truly are is sinful. We were brought up to believe that spirituality is about sublimating—and even repudiating—our true selves. But this story of the burning bush tells us exactly the opposite. It tells us that God wants us to listen to our lives, because that's how we hear him speaking to us. It tells us to embrace our authentic selves and the wonder of life and the present moment.

But we're not good at dwelling in the moment. Like Barber's soprano, we're tempted to dwell in the past—especially if it's one burnished by wistful sentiment. I'm reminded of some lines in R. S. Thomas's poem "The Bright Field":

Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Moses could have turned God's commission down. He could have put on his sandals and walked back down the mountain to the relative comfort of his father-in-law Jethro's house. He could have simply said, "I can't take on the sufferings and sorrows of the Israelites in Egypt." He could have tried to deny the truth about himself and had a peaceful and comfortable life. But would it have been a good life, a purposeful life, a godly life?

And then there's Jesus who could have stuck to his carpentry in Nazareth, kept a low profile and stayed out of the way of both the Romans and Pharisees. He could have upheld the traditional teachings and taboos of his society and his faith. And he certainly could have avoided going up to Jerusalem which brought everything to a

head. But then again, he said, “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

Which leaves you and me. Today, the one who is I AM burns with promise before us— if only we have the courage to go toward them. Today, the one who is I AM calls us by name and tells us who we are. Today, the one who is I AM quickens the potential for our lives. Today, the one who is I AM calls us—as Moses was called—to let ourselves live in the power of the name by which we were called, and to live for the sake of the name which calls us: the name of pure and inextinguishable love.