

**Sermon from Exodus 3:1-14**  
**Given Sunday, June 12, 2022**  
**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**  
**Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor**

*Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock deep into the wilderness, Moses came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The messenger of God appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a thorn bush. Moses saw – “the bush is ablaze with fire, and yet it isn't consumed!”*

*Moses said, “Let me go over and look at this remarkable sight – and see why the bush doesn't burn up!” When God saw Moses coming to look more closely, God called out to him from the midst of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” Moses answered, “I am here.” God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors,” the voice continued, “the God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Rebekah and Isaac, the God of Leah and Rachel and Jacob!”*

*Moses hid his face, afraid to look at the Holy One. Then God said, “I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cries under those who oppress them; I have felt their sufferings. Now I have come down to rescue them from the hand of Egypt, out of their place of suffering, and bring them to a place that is wide and fertile, a land flowing with milk and honey – the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the children of Israel has reached me, and I have watched how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now, go! I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”*

*But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?” God answered, “I will be with you, and this is the sign by which you will know that it is I who sent you: after you bring my people out of Egypt, you will all worship at this very mountain.”*

*“But,” Moses said, “when I go to the children of Israel and say to them, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you, if they ask me, ‘what is this God’s name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I am who I am. This is what you will tell the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”*

—

Was George Burns or Morgan Freeman a better God? Did you prefer Rodney Dangerfield or Alanis Morissette portraying the Holy One? If a film were the story of your life, and you were to cast that role, who would you go with? A superstar or an unknown? Would it even be a person? How much would your choice reflect your childhood teaching, your questions, your fears, your hopes?

If you were with us in January and February, you know that we spent those months tackling a new “big question” every week. We asked about specific scriptures and about the Bible as a whole, we asked about doctrines that seem troubling or damaging, we asked about teachings we’ve inherited that for

one reason or another don't make much sense to us anymore, or maybe never did. There were a lot of great questions, and some we couldn't get to during that time, and so I saved them and promised that we'd try to return to them at some point. So for this summer series, we're pulling out one of those saved questions: Did God create humanity, or did humanity create God?

And in the spirit of some of those other great world religious traditions that are always trying to smash binaries, to extend our thinking from either/or to both/and... In that spirit, to the question, Did God create humanity, or did humanity create God?, I would answer: yes.

But we've got a long summer ahead of us and that's a really short answer, so of course there's more to say.

We know what our tradition says about the first part of that question. In Genesis, in our book of origins, there's a garden teeming with life, and a Creator God delighting in all of it. Building, layering with greens and blues and browns, calling forth night and day and painting sunrises and sunsets to lead

us from one to another, filling the space with creepy crawly bugs and soaring flying birds and swimming diving fish and then, finally - or first? - creatures like us.

In the first two chapters of Genesis we get two totally different stories about how this happens. And that's ok. We don't need them to agree. They're not scientific accounts. They're spiritual reflections. They're meditations on the wonder of it all. They're early people's recognition that the world that surrounds and sustains us is not something we made. The creation stories are gratitude for that, and they are curiosity about it. Did God create humanity? Our tradition has always said, "Yes. We are not our own."

But this summer, we're going to spend our time with the second part of that question: "Did humanity create God?"

And I'm sure there are some circles in which even raising the question would be considered heresy. That would insist that whatever truth there is about God has been revealed, not invented, and that our imaginations must limit themselves to that revelation.

I kind of think any revelation that has ever really come from God asks us to not let our imaginations be limited.

In our story for today, Moses sees a desert fire burning and he doesn't run. He comes closer. And maybe this in itself isn't, like, always great advice to follow. But he comes closer because he's paying attention. He comes closer because his curiosity gets the best of him. He comes closer because he can see that what's happening is fascinating, but not dangerous. It's wild, but not vengeful.

The bush is burning, and it is not consumed. Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna noted that anyone could see a bush on fire. But it's a special kind of attention, a deeper kind of looking, to notice that though it is burning, it is not consumed. Moses notices, and God notices his attention. And this is where their conversation begins, with God saying, "I pay attention, too."

He gives Moses a job - a high calling - like the words that are spoken to graduates at awards ceremonies, at baccalaureate, at commencement - God tells Moses that there is great pain

and trouble in the world, and that he is needed for it - and Moses says, “but who *are* you?”

It’s an interesting question, because just a couple of lines earlier, God offers an introduction: “I am the God of your ancestors.” God names those ancestors. God tells Moses, “We have some people in common. Your friends are my friends and my friends are your friends.”

But that’s not enough for Moses. As if he’s saying - “that’s who you *have been*, but who *are* you?” - and God gives the biggest, widest, most un-pin-down-able answer ever: I am who I am.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *She Who Is*, notes that a society always names God in accordance with its highest good. A Father God is born from a patriarchal society. An Almighty God is the name given by a society often waging battles. God is named as Rock by people living turbulent lives, in need of some sense of security and stability. All of these are ways people have created God over the years. Arguably, any biblical image is a way someone has created God. We’ll look at lots of those over this summer, unpack some common and some

not-so-common images of God that have been meaningful throughout history.

But I like opening with this one, this story where God names God's own self as *the gift and the mystery of being*. "I am who I am." It can also be translated *I will be who I will be* - or, *I am who I will be*. There is nothing at all concrete there. Perhaps nothing helpful. I can imagine Moses saying, back to God, "Would you please just answer the question?"

But listen to what this response does. Moses asks for a name to give when people ask why he's there. When people ask who he is, to be about the work of liberation and justice. Who sent him to dismantle oppression. Why he thinks he can change the world. And God tells him, "Tell them 'I am' sent you." And this is not just an answer. It is a tool for Moses.

Because any time Moses gives this answer, the words are in his own mouth. They are about God but they also become his own.

Why are you here? I am.

Who sent you? I am.

Whose power upholds you? I am.

Answering with this first, mysterious name of God - *I am* - when we say that out loud, we affirm our own being as well. The more Moses is questioned, the more he gets to speak his own mysterious, evolving, basic truth, contained in God's name: *I am*. We are because God is, and God is because we are, and maybe there is no teasing those apart.

Centuries ago, Saint Augustine said, "If we have understood, then what we have understood is not God. St. Augustine." It's a statement meant to preserve the mystery, the undefinability of God, and even though it's a negative, I've always found some comfort there. But even if we might never understand, not fully, I think if we have been curious, if we have named, if we have sung, if we have asked again and again, we have been faithful.

So welcome, to this summer, to this exploration of who God is and - in and through and with and because of that - who we are, too.