

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 3.7-22; Acts 17.22-34; Psalm 81; Matthew 11.28-30

The God of Movement

Prayer: Loving God you respond to us day after day. You surround us with your love and grace. You encircle us with your Holy Presence. You penetrate our hearts and minds with your Holy Word. We give to you all honor and praise and worship. Come to us now, in power, so that as we worship you we may hear your call and experience your nearness. Amen.

When Moses falls down in front of that burning/nonburning bush the Lord says to him. "I've seen my people suffering. I've seen them being punished by their taskmasters. I've heard their cries for relief. And now I'm ready to act. You, Moses, you are to go and liberate them."

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa." Moses says. "Just a minute here. Why me? Why do I have to go on this suicide mission? I'm the guy who ran away from Egypt in order to live. I'm just a refugee sheep wrangler. I'm nobody other than a wanted man."

Who can blame Moses? I think that any of us would have the same response. "Why me?"

But the Lord doesn't exactly answer Moses. Which figures. That's the way that the Lord usually is. Same with Jesus. They answer the other, unspoken, questions. Instead, the Lord says, "I'll be with you. And you'll know that I'm with you when you get back out here to this Mountain of Desolation, and this scrawny bush -- along with all of the other Israelites."

And Moses cries out again: "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I won't know for sure that you're with me until I've already committed to this suicidal undertaking, and have brought all of those people out of Egypt? I won't really know that you're with me until we get back out here, into the middle of nowhere, again? That's crazy."

Crazy or not, the same is still true today. Following God is often exactly that. We don't know that we're doing the right thing until we've committed ourselves.

We all have a desire for everything to be laid out in a clear and specific plan that we may use as a roadmap. We like to try to control the future. Most of us don't like the idea of jumping into things unsure of where we're going to land. But following God, often means: Jump! -- And then we'll see if that was the right thing to do.

Whenever churches become places that must know the outcome before they make a decision to do something, well, then, they become empty, dry, stale, fearful places. Following God means following God into the unknown. It means living by faith, which is not sight. And living by faith is always frightening.

Now, that doesn't mean that we should be stupid. Unfortunately, churches and Christians are often rather attracted to stupid.

I happened to be flipping through channels the other day and this one televangelist creep was asking people to give a \$1000 "seed money". He assured people that the Lord would give everyone who gave a thousand dollars, ten times as much in return. "Plant the seed, by giving your money to us, then the Lord will provide the crop." And of course, the logical response is, if it's that easy then you, televangelist, you give me \$100,000 and let the Lord bless you by ten-fold. You'll be a millionaire." (By the way, whenever someone complains that they never received their ten thousand dollars, the ministry will tell them that the joy and satisfaction that they received from the Holy Spirit for being generous is worth far more than 10k. Then they smile.)

Anyhow, the wicked yahoo on television, had the audacity to say, "If you can't pay a thousand dollars now, don't worry about it. Put \$100 on your credit card now. And then set it up to pay another \$100 every month for ten months. God will still bless you if you do it that way."

I screamed bad words at him. I can imagine that a number of people who couldn't afford the debt believed him and anteed up, sending themselves farther into debt.

As a faith community, following God means following God into the unknown, but not into stupidity.

When we were talking about needing a larger space because we were outgrowing our old building we considered building on our old property. We had the space. But that would have cost over a million dollars, for an ugly square box, and we would have had to start from scratch. We were tempted because we were working with some people who kept pushing, pushing, pushing us to do exactly that. They kept saying: "The Lord will provide."

They even made models and setup visits by architects and general contractors. We were given strategies about how to milk more money from the congregation. But we kept dragging our feet because it seemed like God was calling us to move, but not to go that far into debt.

We eventually found this place. And yes, we did go into debt to buy this place. And when we asked old members for some financial help, a couple wrote back long letters about how financially irresponsible we were being. They scolded us.

But we felt called by God to move. Those letter writers weren't part of our congregation any more. They didn't feel the call. But we did. And then, finally, we sold our other property, so that we really didn't owe all that much on this place. And we've made it now for eight years and I don't think any of us can imagine still being on Newton Street. The only thing any of us miss is the worship wall. And many of you don't even know what that is.

We must use our sanctified common sense, when making decisions about what God is calling us to do, but we must also be willing to take steps into the unknown.

The same thing happened with The Landing. We felt called and we jumped in, whole hog. And there were people who counseled restraint. Maybe we should start with just one night a month and see how it goes. Maybe we should limit how much food we give out. Maybe we should pack bags of food for people so that we can control consumption. All of that was rational. All of that made sense.

But it seemed like God wanted us to do more. And so we did do more, unsure of how it would all continue into the next year. But it did continue. And then it continued again. And it continued again. And it continued again. And now, in 2017, it continues still. We now know that we made the right choice. We now know that we followed God into the unknown, and it's been a blessing and an honor to support The Landing with our money and to serve food Friday after Friday.

"Moses, lead my people out of Egypt, and once you get here to this place again, you'll know that you're following me."

So Moses asks the next question. It's reasonable, I think. He asks, "What if they want to know what the name of the God is who sent me? What do I say then? I don't know who you are."

And God said, my name is: "I AM WHO I AM. (eh'yeh asher eh'yeh) Tell them, I AM sent me."

Now, the thing about that name is this. Those Hebrew words may be translated a whole bunch of different ways. That name may be, "I AM who/which/what/ where I AM." But it may also be translated, "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." And again, it may be, "I WILL BE who/which/what/where I WILL BE." And I like that translation even better. I WILL BE has more action inside of it, than does I AM. I AM seems more static. I once read a novel where it was translated, "I WILL BE WHOMEVER I WANT TO BE"

The thing is, the God who calls Moses, the God who calls us, his name is a verb. Isn't that fabulous? The LORD's name is a form of the Hebrew verb "to be."

God's not a noun. Our names are all nouns. Most of the gods throughout the religions are nouns. But the God of Moses is a form of the verb "to be." And anyone who's studied a foreign language understands that a verb is much more difficult to capture and define and to hem in, than is a noun. A noun you may point to. A verb, though, is a slippery little bugger. Our God is a verb. We should celebrate that fact. A verb!

I think about all of those idol gods that have been worshipped throughout history. They were all nouns. They were gods who could be pointed at because they just sat there, like a lump on a log.

But right in our God's name we discern movement. I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. Stop looking for this God in this place or that. Stop insisting that this God is like this or that. The God of Moses is a moving God who is impossible to pin down or to define.

One of the Christian theological doctrines is called the Immutability of God. Which means the Changelessness of God. And that doctrine was created because the theologians want us all to confess that God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. They want us to understand that the same God who called Abraham, is the same God who called Moses, is the same God who called the disciples, is the same God who calls us.

The problem is that the doctrine of immutability makes it difficult to accept the translation, "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." There's too much unpredictability inside of that name. But isn't that unpredictability beautiful?

Look, God is a mystery. We cannot ever even come close to fully knowing God. But we do know some things. God has revealed some of God's self to us. And one rather profound aspect of this revelation is that God is a verb. God is always moving.

Which means, God is always responding to this world and to us. God's being, God's essence is moved by our experiences in this world.

The LORD said, "I've indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I've heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I'm concerned about their suffering. So I've come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (3.7-8)

That's the God whom we follow. A God who's on the move to work with us. To be with us.

That's what our God does to save us. God packed up out of heaven and came to this earth, because our God heard our cries for help, heard our cries for salvation, heard our cries to be untied with God. And so, the I WILL BE became a human being. Movement.

But more than that, the I WILL BE is always moving about us and within us and throughout us and among us, as the Holy Breath, the Holy Wind, the Holy Spirit. So, here again is another example of the movement of the I WILL BE in order to be united with us.

And even now, even now, the I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE hears you when you cry out to God. And even now the Lord responds to our cries for help.

I've said many times to you in sermons, I think that I said it three times this week to individuals, "You know that problem that you're dealing with, have you given it to Jesus? Give it to Jesus. Tell him that it's his problem to deal with. And move forward. You'll be surprised how God lightens the loads when we dare or remember to give it to God."

Seriously, people, the Lord God whom we worship is the same God who led the Israelites out of slavery. This is the same God who stood outside the camp as a pillar of fire. This is the same God who came to this world to liberate us from our own slavery. This is the same God who is with us, right here, right now. This is the same God who moves our hearts and our minds when we stand in a circle around the table. This is the same God who calls us to follow. The God who is I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE is present among us and will respond to us.

So turn your hearts towards this amazing mystery, throw back your arms and head, and allow our moving God to come and fill you with God's love and peace.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.