

God is a verb

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Exodus 3:1-15

Ps 105:1-6, 23-26,45c

Romans 12:9-21

What a strange pairing: this text from Exodus and the speeches in Denver at the Democratic National Convention. I suspect the speeches soon to come out of the Twin Cities from the Republican National Convention will be equally at odds with this text. Could there be more contrast between Moses, McCain and Obama?

We are accustomed to men, and thankfully now women, clamoring to be national leaders. They often tell us how hard their life was before they became successful. Whether it is because they were poor, a prisoner or lost a loved one, the hardship makes them a better person. We understand hardship and their hardship makes them just like us — average Americans; their adversity cuts right through the millions of dollars that now separate us. With this or that candidate in power we will all become one America with French Fries, Belgian beer and Japanese cars fueled by Middle Eastern oil to help unite us.

Once it is established that they are (almost) just like us, these would-be world leaders make the case for how they are prepared to lead the largest military in the world, create more jobs, keep the country and its people and borders safe, fund health care, cure illness and still luxuriously tuck their children and/or grandchildren into bed at night. We spend oodles of hours listening to these (empty) promises with hopes that life will get better. We imagine the

bluebird of happiness and good fortune will finally land on us. As Americans, we long for leadership that will protect us, guide us and save us from all we that fear.

As Christians we read and tell a different story. Absent are the self-promotion, the national committee gathering and groups fighting over whom best to lead the people out of their desperate situation. While the bible contains various stories of people being called to leadership, our text this morning features a murderer — posing as a shepherd — who would rather remain anonymous in the fields than become a heroic, historic leader.

Like modern day politicians, the leaders that emerge in our stories endure poverty, famine and hardship but with a twist — they do not campaign for the job of savior. In our tradition it is the least likely, the youngest, the smallest, the poorest that lead us — toward God. The prophets point the people, not toward a human savior, but toward something more enduring, more eternal. The reluctant and unlikely Moses points us to the I AM that leads and guides us to freedom and justice and peace.

At first glance, this story of Moses does not inspire much confidence. Moses is a baby about to be killed because he is born to the wrong people, to the Israelites. His quick thinking mother makes a small basket and floats him down the river. The daughter of the pharaoh finds him and adopts him. She returns him to his own family with his mother as his wet-nurse.

Though raised in the palace, Moses remains connected to his own people. As he grows older he sees the Israelites working as slaves. He observes an Israelite being abused by an Egyptian. His immediate reaction, after glancing

around to make sure no one else sees him, is to kill the abuser. His subsequent attempt to cover up the murder is unsuccessful. Now in danger of losing his own life, Moses leaves his cushy life in the palace and flees to the wilderness to start over. In Midian he meets the daughter of a priest and settles down with her to have his own family.

Moses has a new, “safe” life, as a shepherd tending his father-in-law’s flocks. It is as a shepherd, not palace royalty, that Moses meets the divine. Each curious generation tries to explain this phenomenon that so captures Moses’ attention: a burning bush that is not consumed. Some scholars say it was a particular bush with red berries that may have looked like it was burning.

Others say it is not nature, but language to which we should pay attention in this story. The words for bush, *s’neh*, and *Sinai*, the mountain where Moses receives the commandments, sound very much alike. Whether the bush is burning with flame or red with berries is hard to say. What we do know is that *s’neh* and *Sinai* give us this clue: Moses is encountering God.

After God has Moses’ attention, God draws some perimeters and offers credentials — I am the God of your father, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses knows the stories of this God. He hides his face in reverence and fear.

God goes on to say that God has observed the misery in which the Israelites have lived as slaves for so many years. And God does not want God’s people to live in bondage and fear. So God has a plan to deliver the Israelites from slavery, to lead them to freedom.

This God, that sees misery, must surely also have seen that Moses is a murderer. Can he even be trusted? Yet God chooses Moses to be the messenger of God's words, the one to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses knows the danger this puts him in, to return to Egypt and confront the pharaoh. Moses resists, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?"

God gives no list of reasons why Moses is qualified. God's simple response is "I will be with you." And offers as a sign of God's promise and presence that the people will be lead right back to that very mountain to worship God.

Of course Moses has more excuses why he cannot be the one to carry out God's plan. He doesn't even know God's name. How can he tell people that God has sent him if he doesn't know God's name? In psychological terms, if you can name something you have power over it. If I can name what it is that frightens me, it no longer has the same power over me. Is Moses trying to manage God? Or is he just stalling for time? Whatever Moses' motivations, God doesn't play this game.

God will not be controlled. God is not going to take on one of the pantheon of names for the gods that the Egyptians know. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel just is. This God is eternal, then, now and forever. This God is the I AM.

Despite God's pronouncements of I AM, Moses finds more excuses to refuse this call to leadership. God gives a game plan to Moses, with words he

can say to the Pharaoh, with ways to prove that he is sent by the all powerful and eternal I AM. Moses still refuses to accept the assignment.

Let it not be said that God is not creative with our resistance. Where there is no will, there is **still** a way with God. Inarticulate Moses is finally paired with his articulate brother Aaron and together they go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and free their people.

It's God's name in this story that makes me stop this time. Names are nouns; a noun is a person, place or thing. But God's name is not a noun, it is a verb; it's not really a name at all. This God that Moses worshipped, that our ancestors worshipped, is not dependent on a place or inextricably tied to a person. God is not a noun. And though God created and loves detail and particularity, diversity and beauty, God is not an adjective.

God just is.

The I AM God is found in many cultures. Many religions proclaim that there is something eternal, beyond us, more than we can know. The Eternal Mystery is different from us as humans because we live and then we die. As humans we are impermanent but the eternal I AM is. It is not the "I was" or the "I will be" though it is those too. It is the curious I AM that joins us all together, binds us to each other and to God's creation.

In our particular tradition as Christians, inherited from the Jews, we have the audacity to claim that the I AM spoke to Moses, that the I AM cared about the Israelites in captivity. When we are at our bravest we claim that I AM still cares

about those in captivity, those who live in fear and bondage, those who are despised and ignored by the powerful.

Our tradition even makes the bold statement that we are created in this verb's image, if a verb can be said to have an image. How can this be, that we are created in the image of the I AM; the eternal that has no beginning and no end; that acts to proclaim freedom, give new sight, and heal the sick. It sounds as grand as a politician's claim. No wonder Moses wanted a different name to deal with, something simple like one of the Egyptian gods: Ra or Set(h).

But the name is not simple; we, like our ancestors in the faith, are created in the image of I AM. And so like Moses, we are asked to forget that we have a speech impediment or that we *are the most* articulate. We set aside that we are most beautiful or most homely; it is of no consequence that we cannot sing or that we have an operatic voice, that we are millionaires or penniless, even that we have murder in our past. We are created after the I AM, we are beings after God's own self. Just as God is, we are. Just as God acts, we are called to action.

This is a delicate balance in which to live, a tricky balance from which to lead: the balance between being and doing, between praying and protesting, between worship and work. As humans striving to be like God, we never quite achieve that balance even though we proclaim that worship and work are one. We always seem to err on one side or the other. This is why we need each other, in community, to truly embody the being and doing of God.

God is so big that we are all needed to work together to recreate this image. God is so intimate that it takes all of us being quiet to hear the voice of the I AM.

Jesus knew the tradition; he understood in whose image he was created. He said, "I AM the way. I AM the truth. I AM the life." As followers of Jesus, we look to that way, truth and life to continue to form and guide us.

It is tempting to look to national leaders that yearn for power, that covet our vote — and place our trust in them. Though we know the I AM God and the I AM Jesus, we still want to believe the political leaders when **they** claim to know the *way*, claim to tell the *truth*, claim to have the keys to a better *life* for all of us.

But we must remember that in the end, our help comes from the eternal I AM. In the end, our prayer and work for justice is because of, and in the image of, I AM. In the end — there is no end, for the I AM is always present, is always past and always future. It is I AM who called Moses and led the children of Israel. It is from I AM that Jesus comes. It is in this mysterious I AM, in whose likeness we are made, that we place our faith, that we find our life.

May it be so.