

“Excuse Me?”  
August 31, 2008

Exodus 3:1-14  
Matthew 16:21-26; 19:27

I started wondering last week about God’s job description. Maybe I got carried away by the presidential campaign. Maybe I got caught up in thinking and writing, not only about the names we call our Holy Source, but also about what we expect from God. Shoot, maybe I got a bit lost in pondering the imponderable, in order to avoid doing the more mundane tasks of ministry, like organizing my files and catching up on my correspondence!

But however I got there, I found myself wondering what the Holy One’s job description would include. Here are some of the things that came to mind.

Must be trustworthy yet mysterious.

Must manage the tension between being as close as breath and as vast as the unseen universe.

Will be required to create a world with some degree of order but also with some room for miracles.

Will be required to be comforting *and* challenging.

Must be at ease in addressing conflicting needs and prayers. For more information, see discussion of “War,” beginning on page 13.

Must be reliable yet surprising.

Will need to provide the means for human liberation while also respecting human free will.

Above all, will be required to love many – and we do mean “many” – cheeky people. This one is the deal breaker: the successful candidate for this job simply *must* be able to love and work with countless cheeky, back-talking, skeptical people.

If you ask me, it’s that last item in the list that must be the toughest. Try to imagine being God and having to deal with this morning’s characters, Moses and Peter. Let’s take Moses first.

By the time he gets to Mount Horeb, Moses has already led something of a charmed life. As an infant, instead of being thrown *into* the Nile to die, as Pharaoh has ordered, Moses is placed *on* the Nile in a water-proof basket, where Pharaoh’s own daughter sees him, saves him, and adopts him as her own.

Now, many years later, after Moses has had to flee Egypt as a murderer, he’s leading the relatively quiet life of a husband, father, and shepherd. Then one day he takes the flock to Horeb, the mountain of God. And there on Horeb, the kind of things you would expect to happen on a mountain of God do indeed start happening. An angel appears in a flame. A bush is burning but not burning up. God speaks to Moses, calling him by name, and tells him what his own people are still enduring in Egypt – suffering, hardship, and oppression. The voice from the bush then tells Moses that he is going to play a central role in the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt.

So far, so good. God is fulfilling some of the more straight-forward duties of being the Holy One: remembering people’s names, developing a plan for bringing people

out of oppression and bondage, throwing in a miracle here and there, and making a promise or two.

But things get a little harder when it's *Moses'* turn to talk. After the angel, the burning bush, God's greeting, and God's plans, how does Moses respond? In essence, he says, "Excuse me? Are you crazy? We're talking about Pharaoh here – the guy with the money, the weapons, the chariots, *the armies*. Who am *I* to challenge someone with so much power? How can I bring the *people* out of Egypt, when I was barely able to get *myself* out alive?"

When the Holy One answers Moses' skepticism and alarm with the simple assurance, "I will be with you," Moses really starts to lose it and uses my favorite word in both readings this morning: "Look!" as in "Look, you're asking too much; you've gone too far. You're going to have to find someone else for this project." But Moses, to his credit, hangs in long enough to think about this project and then asks for what he thinks he needs. "Look," he says, "if I'm going to have any credibility with the Israelites, I'm going to have to be able to tell them who sent me. I'll need to tell them what your name is." At this point, God meets yet another requirement in the job description for being the Holy One – being able to answer human questions without giving too much away. God answers, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM sent you." At this point, I'm sure there's a gap in the Biblical record, because we have no recording of what must have been Moses' response: "Arrrghh!!" (in Hebrew, of course).

Fast forward several centuries, and we come to the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is, in comparison to the voice from the burning bush, being a little less enigmatic, perhaps, but equally as challenging, if not more so. Jesus tells his disciples, "If you want to be my followers, deny yourselves and pick up your cross. Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it." After this and several other hard teachings, including Jesus' warning that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it will be for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, Peter reaches one of his breaking points and uses that great word, "Look!" as in "Look, we've given everything we have. We've followed you, which hasn't been easy, believe me, and you keep finding ways to tell us we have to keep giving! Excuse me ... hello ... what's left for us to give or to give up?"

Now, if you have a sense that we should always address God and God's anointed ones with reverence and respect, you may think that Moses and Peter have gone too far this morning with their Hebrew and Greek versions of "Look!" "Excuse me?" and "Are you kidding?"

If you think they've crossed the line, you're probably not alone. There certainly is much in the Christian tradition that suggests that we should all approach and address God with care, with awe, and even with fear. But it's important to remember that there are also many stories in the Bible describing people who seem fed up with the Holy One and who express their frustration. The good news about those people is that they're not struck dead for verbalizing their anger and irritation at God ... or, at least, not *all* of them are struck dead. Moses and Peter, for example, survive these and other outbursts and live on to do extraordinary and extraordinarily faithful things.

So even though I do feel reverence for God, even though I do experience the Holy One as blessed creator, redeemer, and sustainer, and even though I have tried to leave my litigator, "Excuse me?" persona behind, I confess that in these stories, I'm *not* rooting for

God. I'm rooting for the *guys*. Don't these guys mirror more of the human spirit and especially more of the Congregational/UCC spirit than someone, whether in the Bible or in our own lives, who is pious and gentle and meek and mild, 24/7? Don't these Biblical guys from long ago seem more like the person you see in the mirror and the person you see in the pew next to you than someone like Samuel who surrenders to God with no resistance, saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?" or like Abraham, who immediately and with no protest whatsoever leaves his home, his family, and his people to travel to an unknown place?

Don't *you* have moments – days, months, even *years* – when you want to say to God, "Look, what you keep asking of me is too much; it's too hard"? When so many messages come from so many sources that certain people are our enemies, that we must defeat them through the power of war, the power of imprisonment, or simply through the power of fenced borders and gated communities, aren't you tempted to say to the Spirit of Life, "Excuse me? In the midst of all this, you're asking me to *love* my enemies, forgive those who hurt me, and feed the hungry, no matter how many of them there are? Do you have any idea how hard that is to do? When other people turn to violence, to hate, and to ugly, ugly ridicule, hurting me and people I love, you ask me to see *you* in them and to *love* you in them? Do you have any idea what you're asking of me?"

And aren't there moments when you're sure you've given all that you can give to God's healing, loving work in your life and in the world and the Spirit comes along and asks for more? In those moments, don't you want to say, "Look, I've done all I can do, and I've given all I can give!"? Maybe this moment comes when your child needs some of your time and attention and you don't feel as though you have any of either left in you. Maybe it comes when you've been on the path of faith for years and have left so many of the things that separated you from God behind, and then the Spirit tells you it's time to let go of something else – your addiction to busyness, perhaps; maybe your sense of self-importance or your lack of self-worth; or your obsession with the past or the future.

Or maybe, just maybe, in the next few weeks when the Stewardship Committee playfully and faithfully urges you to be more generous in your giving to the ministry and ministries of this church, you'll want to echo Peter's reply, "Look, we've left everything. What about us? What about me?" Maybe *you'll* want to exclaim, "Excuse me? Are you serious?" when the Stewardship Committee responds to God's call and challenge in their work for the church by calling and challenging all of us to give more fully of ourselves in our work for the church. (Now, if – *when* – you do exclaim, "Excuse me?" or "Look here!" within the context of this congregation and what God calls you to do and give here, I urge you, in your conversations with other church members and your minister, to be candid but not cruel, clear but not crabby, if you can.)

Seriously, my beloved brothers and sisters, whenever that protest stirs in your heart, whenever something within you wants to cry out, not with the sarcasm of "Excuse me?" but with the plea of "Look, what you're asking is too hard, too much," follow the example of Moses and Peter this morning and take your anguish and anger to the Holy One who created and loves us all. Be willing to say to God, "In a world with so much distrust and violence and hate and despair, do you have any idea how hard it is to try to keep love at the center of what I do? Do you have any idea how hard it is to be vulnerable and compassionate when so much human energy goes into power and

conquest? Do you have any idea how hard it is to give of myself when no one seems to appreciate my efforts?"

*Ask the questions*, my blessed friends. Then be willing to listen to the answer, for the answer does come. God does fulfill the requirements of the job of being God, so the answer of comfort and challenge comes: "Yes, my beloved, I *do* know how hard it is to keep love at the center in the midst of betrayal. I *do* know how hard it is to be vulnerable and compassionate in the midst of cruelty and violence. I *do* know how hard it is to give of myself when my giving is ignored or rejected. This, my beloved, is why I gave the world the Christian story, so that you would know that none of your struggles is alien to me, none of your pain is unknown to me, and none of your fear or despair is beyond my understanding or embrace. For I have lived it all in Jesus, and I continue to live it in you. I still am who I am, the one who is with you, always."

The Holy One is ready for your questions, my friends, especially the irritated and anguished questions. Ask them and then listen.

Amen.

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