

Westminster Sermon "Here I Am"  
Sunday, August 31, 2014  
Scripture: Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21  
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 3:1-15, where we read about Moses' encounter with Yahweh in the burning bush. The miracle of the bush that burned but would not be consumed is one of the Bible's great symbols for the presence of God. *It is a symbol of an irresistible Being, whose energies cannot be contained and who is not subject to decay or deterioration. The command to Moses that he remove his sandals serves as a reminder that the real wonder here is not that of a shrub that refuses to be burned up, but that of a God unlike any other.* Listen now for the word of God.

*Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." 13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations. Amen.*

Our second reading, Romans 12:9-21, appears to be a slightly disjointed list of exhortations presented without much clarification or context. However, in the verses preceding this passage, Paul provides the framework for what we hear today. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds," he urges the church in Rome. He continues by describing the church as the body of Christ, with many different members, each called to a different task and given different gifts. And in such a community—one set aside and transformed, and marked by equality despite difference—love must be the overwhelming ethic. And so today we hear Paul's instructions and encouragements for living as the body of Christ. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: "Here I Am"

*The text: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."  
Romans 12:15*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us curious minds and attentive hearts that we might always be ready to respond when you call. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Before I get started, you should probably know something—I am a language enthusiast. It seems appropriate for a Presbyterian, what with our focus on the Word of God. However, I wanted to warn you now, because later on I am going to wade a bit in the waters of Hebrew grammar, and I don't want anyone to be frightened when it happens. Because I get very excited about the intricacies of Hebrew.

But before we have fun with Hebrew, let's take a look at where we are. In our reading from Exodus, Moses encounters the bush that burns but is not consumed by the fire. And from this bush, God calls him by name, and tells him to go into Egypt and command Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Moses, as we know, is a person from both worlds, an Israelite raised in Pharaoh's family. After murdering an Egyptian overseer, Moses fled to Midian, where he married and started a family. He is living a simple, and we get the impression, contented life when he encounters God. And in this encounter, all simplicity and peace is overthrown, and the entire course of his life changes.

Now I'm sure that many of us already know this story. The story of Moses is possibly the best-known Bible story—or at least in the top five. It's exciting, it's cinematic—it was animated by Dream Works! It has characters to root for and villains to hate, and even in the extraordinary elements of plagues and burning bushes, the human experience and emotions are readily accessible, even if not explicitly drawn in the text.

And we know what's coming next—Moses will, eventually, lead the Israelites out of slavery and, even more eventually, into the Promised Land. It is one of humanity's most enduring and powerful stories of liberation.

And all this happens because Moses was willing to turn aside from his peaceful and familiar day. All this happens because Moses noticed a sight out of the ordinary, and was curious.

When I first translated this passage in Hebrew class, early in my first year of seminary, I got chills. So many people, for so long, have been reading these words—this story of a God who reaches out, who catches our attention; a God who calls us by name and sends us out to be God’s hands and feet and voices in the world, to bring about liberation and justice for the powerless and oppressed. This is where God tells us God’s name—this is the God Who Is. But before that, in verse four, something happens:

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה  
וַיֹּמֶר מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּמֶר הִנְנִי׃

[U-Yar Adonai ki sar lirot uYikrah elay elohim mitokh haS’neh uYomer Mosheh, Mosheh. UYomer Hinneh’ni!]

“When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.””

Here I am! In Hebrew this is Hinneh’ni. (And this is where I’m going to get geeky:) This word, Hinneh’ni, comes from the root word “hinneh”, which has no English equivalent. Hinneh is often translated as “Lo!” or “Behold!”—it, my Hebrew grammar writes, “indicates the presence of something or someone, or the immediacy of an event or situation.”

In the first person form, “hinneh’ni!”, used in this story, it is translated as “Here I am!” And Moses isn’t the only one to use it—Abraham, Samuel and so many other people called by God respond with this word—Hinneh’ni! Here I am.

But Hinneh’ni is more than just *Here* I am. Hinneh’ni says here I am—what next? Hinneh’ni contains a total openness, a responsiveness not just to this call, but to whatever follows. Hinneh’ni shouts Here I Am!—open, waiting, standing on the balls of our feet ready to move in any direction, already participating in whatever has begun.

In our reading from Romans, Paul is speaking about participation in what has begun; participation as members of the body of Christ. And so Paul speaks about love. Jesus has already given the greatest commandment—love God, and love neighbor as self—and here Paul is, in many ways, expanding and clarifying what that looks like.

I always go back and forth on whether I think this list of Paul’s sounds a little obnoxious or painfully beautiful. Sometimes it reads as a little too good, and a little too simplistic, maybe. I think, though, that it only sounds at all obnoxious because it’s so powerful—a world in which we truly acted this way would be God’s kingdom. This vision of a world in which all act in love is one that we as Christians long for.

And I think so much of the power of this vision is that Paul makes it very clear that genuine love is action, not just feeling. And this genuine love is practical—it is hands on, it is engaged. Contribute to the needs of the community, extend hospitality to strangers; offer food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty; rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. This genuine love is action in response to need. Whether those needs be physical, emotional, or spiritual, genuine love, Paul tells us, is to notice and to respond in kind.

This genuine love is, I think, *hinneh'ni*—Here I am; participating and responding, ready and waiting.

And we know that this is love—we feel loved when our friends and family are attentive to us, when they notice our pain or fear or joy and turn aside, and respond. We feel unloved when we are ignored; when our needs and longings go unnoticed, unknown, and unmet.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep: Paul encourages us to love by noticing, by turning aside, by responding.

And I sometimes dismiss these verses for being too simplistic—but they are simple, not simplistic. Being open to the people around us, and joining them wherever they may be is a simple act.

But simple is not the same as easy.

It is not easy to notice, and to turn aside. Our lives are busy. Our minds are full of our many tasks and responsibilities. Even if we are able to notice, turning aside can seem impossible, or even frightening.

It is not easy to feed every hungry person, or offer hospitality to every stranger. It is not easy to simply sit with someone and join them in their grief or joy as if it were our own.

It isn't even easy to be attentive to and responsive to our own internal needs and longings. In the greatest commandment Jesus tells us to love our neighbors *AS* we love ourselves, but often there are so many demands on our attention and time that we cannot even offer genuine love to our own spirits.

Moses turned aside from his path to see this strange sight of a burning bush. He did notice, he was open, and it was because of this that he was able to encounter God and hear God's voice. When God saw that Moses had turned aside, *that's* when God called Moses by name.

And "Here I am!" Moses replied—open, ready, responsive. And then Moses digs in his heels. Moses sees this extraordinary sight, something few of us would ignore; he hears the actual voice of God; he receives explicit and direct instructions from God. If only we had such clear direction; things would be so simple.

Yet simple is not the same as easy, even for Moses. He argues, and argues, and argues. We only hear two of Moses' objections in today's reading, but in the verses that follow, Moses offers excuse after excuse for why he shouldn't be the one to go to Egypt and be God's instrument of liberation.

BUT: Hinneh'ni—Here I am! Moses has already turned aside. He has already declared his presence and his openness. He has already begun participating in this work of God's.

And he shows love in the way to which Paul calls us. In his attentiveness to his world, he finds God. In his responsiveness to God, Moses acts in genuine love. He acts in love for God through working as God's hands and voice; he acts in love for his distant neighbors, bringing them out of slavery; perhaps he even acts in love for himself, returning to his homeland and facing his complicated identity as both Israelite and Egyptian.

God is always calling us. We might not get burning bushes or angels of the Lord, but in so many ways, in so many moments, God calls us by name. Maybe then to love God is to be responsive—to be curious about our world, to be attentive to those around us, to live our lives as a shout of hinneh'ni—Here I am! What next?

Hinneh in all its forms is used to indicate presence and immediacy, and to introduce the circumstances of something that is happening.

Paul tells us that love is something that is happening—love is action—practical, engaged, hands on action: feed the hungry, rejoice with the rejoicing, weep with the weeping, extend hospitality, contribute to the needs of the community.

The scholar Elizabeth Shively writes that the Greek for “contribute” here more literally translates to “participate in”. Participate in the needs of the community, Paul tells us. Participate in what is happening.

We saw last weekend at Commotion Sunday that there is much happening in this church—and there are so many actions of love. Hinneh'ni! We are here, and participating in these happening works of God's.

Hinneh is used to show that something is happening—something is going on. Whether it be Helping Hands or Fair Trade Chocolate, something is happening. Whether it be Compass or Presbyterian Women, something is happening. Whether it be music or mission or fellowship, something is happening.

When Moses saw the bush that was not consumed by fire and turned aside, he became a part of something that was already happening. Here I am! He said, and in making this declaration he began participating.

This story of this God who turned Moses aside and called him by name is a story of God who is and who makes things happen. This is a story of our God who calls us aside from our paths and calls US by name, God who is in the middle of action, who is causing so much to happen, and who invites us to participate—to live our lives each day as a shout of Hinneh'ni!

Here we are! What next?