

Defining Moments

I was one of those English majors that Garrison Keillor pokes fun of; my degree came more than two decades ago. I still find some broken rules and misuse of English language that make me grind my teeth. One of them is the phrase, “it is what it is.” How much better can decent people say nothing? The phrase originated with some sports players trying to explain their performance during a game. I have even heard my boss use this phrase—more than once. Then, I grind my teeth a little later, not right in front of him, anyway.

I checked the list of banished words and phrases published by Lake Superior State University distributed around Christmas each year. Sure enough, “it is what it is” made a solid listing early this year. I have even more excuse to grind my teeth.

I could easily tell of phrases and expressions that are horrible, and set all of our teeth on edge. Some of you are far more qualified than I am to expound on language issues. Besides, one of the injunctions in our readings today is not to think oneself as more wise than what we are.

I thought of this terrible phrase, “it is what it is,” when I read and pondered the story of Moses and God’s appearance to Moses in the burning bush. God says, “I am who I am.” Great. What in the world is that supposed to mean? Is God looking to get on the Lake Superior State’s list of banished phrases, too?

When God says, I am who I am, however, the language is not at all empty. Language, in this case, cannot begin to say who God is, much less define God. There is a strong tradition, especially in reading Hebrew, never even to speak the name of God. In this story, God gives Moses some history to go by—saying, “I’m the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...and Sarah, and Leah, and Rachel, of course. I’m the God of your ancestors” —God has to tell Moses this basically three times in this short narrative. And the God who is and who will be has been paying attention to the suffering of the people of Israel. And now, God will use Moses to help release them from suffering.

Poor Moses. He was tending sheep. He wasn’t looking for trouble. Instead of grinding his teeth over God’s proof of identification, more likely he’s gritting his teeth. So much for an ordinary day tending his father-in-law’s sheep. What would Zipporah say about this when he got home? A burning bush, maybe, but a bush that’s burning and doesn’t burn up? A voice that says, “I am who I am”? What kind of explanation could he give her, much less to Jethro? Jethro’s

serving as a priest in Midian likely means that a phrase like, “I am what I am” might mean Moses has spent too much time in the sun. What kind of God would say that?

It’s likely that Zipporah and Jethro had heard Moses’ outlandish stories before. He must have told them he was born in a time when baby boys were killed like mosquitoes, saved in a basket in the Nile River by none other than his own sister, nursed by his own mother, and raised in Pharaoh’s castle. If you think about it, Moses had a really good thing going back in Egypt—not much competition among males his age, eating from a silver spoon, hanging out with the royalty.

Until one day he goes to check out the work being done, and has a strong case of desire for revenge: his people are persecuted. Moses is so enraged that he kills one of the Egyptian taskmasters. He’s been seen, as he finds out the next day, so he goes undercover and heads to the desert.

This burning bush scene finds Moses having quite successfully blended into the landscape—being a shepherd, having a son and a wife, being Mr. Everyman in Midian. I think of the Saturday Night Live skit from years ago where “Middle Aged Man,” in his oblivion to how he appears to others, wears white socks with dark shoes, polyester plaid shorts with a striped shirt, attempts to look athletic. Moses has become middle aged man—likely content with this incognito act in the desert, never thinking God or anyone else would find him there.

You might say Moses found God there, for our narrative describes Moses as finally going out of his way to check out this burning-but-not-consumed bush. Who knows how long the bush has been burning? Of the 40 years or more that this middle-aged Moses man had been in the sheep business, it’s possible the bush could have been burning for a while before he noticed it.

Instead of focusing on Moses’ attention, or lack of it, the striking revelation in this story is that God has noticed the suffering of the Israelites enough to want to use Moses to do something about it. While Moses may have been quite clueless about how God was going to use him in this, he did already have a personal history of wanting to engage in acts of justice in defending an Israelite some 40 years ago. Moses did have some idea, too, of what it would mean to confront Pharaoh. But his criminal record was enough to make him wonder how in the world he’d get very far in this assignment.

God being God, the I am who I am, means that Moses is in for a big assignment. Moses has some *I am* statements of his own. He says to God’s call of his name, “Here I am.” Later, he asks, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”

Moses’ I am statements seem to be an honest self-assessment: who am I? he asks. And how can I explain who sent me?

God's I am statements are these: I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham...; “and “I am has sent you.” And, “the God of your ancestors...” Another sense of God's identifying statement is, “I will be what I will be,” which hints at God's eternal nature. And God says to Moses, “I will be with you.”

God's I am statements reveal God's concern, God's involvement, and God's eternal omnipresence.

This theophany—or manifestation of God's self—arises from God's awareness of suffering, but also raises issues of theodicy—or how God deals with suffering. God has noticed, he tells Moses, God “has observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters, God says. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.” So indeed God does hear the cries of suffering, and is moved to respond. That is the nature of theodicy—the theological understanding of God's response to suffering. But the further theodicy question here is, “why does it take God so long to do something?” It's not just a matter that God has heard their cries, but judging by Moses' life of 40+ years in the desert---having run away from an episode of trying to right the wrong of the injustice the Israelites were subject to way back then—it's taken God a really, really long time to move to action. Moses, it seems, has actually had it pretty easy compared to the Israelites he left behind in Egypt. Has God been sleeping all this time?

For the past two and a half years now, I've been focusing on pastoral care to patients and families who experience trauma who come to Butterworth Hospital, a regional trauma center. Most of the trauma we see is the result of accidents of one sort or another. Some of the trauma we see is self-inflicted, and some is intentionally inflicted by others.

Suffering is a fearful and sad experience. We have seen plenty of that suffering here at Hope Church and in our world. I do wonder why God chooses some really good people—church people, especially, to endure tragedy and death. With my companions at Butterworth Hospital, we minister and care for those who don't escape accident or injury or assault.

Each of our texts today touches on the issue of suffering: Moses and the Israelites and God all suffer from the injustice of the Egyptians. Jesus tells his disciples that he's about to endure great suffering—and then Peter's fear and resistance make Jesus suffer even more. And Paul tells us in Romans to weep with those who weep, and to be patient in suffering.

Suffering threatens our understanding of the world, and our perspective on how God is at work in the world. Many of the families I interact with defy the threat of this suffering by being oppositional to the suffering: they boldly claim hope and the possibility of a miracle. Hearing these proclamations and reactions to suffering and shock have complicated my understanding of

suffering, or my theodicy. I wonder: how can people not hope? How can family members and friends not react with resistance to news of devastating injury or profound illness? It seems that not to hope, and not to resist such news, would be a most sad place to be.

All of this might be easy for me to say, given that I'm not usually the one who's suffering. I'm a bit like Moses in that regard—tending my sheep, blending into the landscape, being middle-aged woman going about my business of ministry. Much of what I do really does not seem at all profound. I help people find the bathrooms, I bring coffee or water, make phone calls, try to get information or someone who can provide information about the patient's condition. I try to help family members see their loved one as soon as the medical staff allows. Some of that is pretty basic sheep-tending nuts-and-bolts.

Sometimes, there is opportunity to offer a spoken prayer. More often, I find that praying our way through these experiences is the only way to see through them.

What I try to remember about the people who come my way is this: for them, this is a defining moment. This occasion—whether an accident or serious injury or sudden illness—will likely change their lives. Even if the patient recovers, even if the family “goes back to normal,” the experiences that family members have in coming to the surgical ICU will affect how they look at the TV news or read the newspaper or hear prayer requests in their church. The defining moment part is not that there's just one, but that we all face defining moments throughout our lives. By defining moments, I mean the occasions where our character is shaped, or the nature of our character comes through. Defining moments reveal the ways our faith holds us up—or we become aware of the need for faith. Defining moments make us who we are.

It is no wonder that when Jesus tells the disciples that he's about to suffer and die, that Peter responds with so much resistance. The NRSV says Jesus “began to show the disciples that he must undergo great suffering.” Peter got the message, and he didn't like it.

I think of Peter as a middle-aged man kind of guy, too. He had just made a terrific affirmation of faith earlier in this chapter of Matthew 16, saying in response to Jesus question, “who do people say that I am?” by saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter's statement was validated by Jesus' blessing that Peter would establish the church. Peter could easily have been feeling utmost confidence that he was finally “getting it” as Jesus' disciple. Peter had received his certification—he had met one of his defining moments by stating who he understood Jesus to be.

But the next thing we read is that Peter gets burned, so to speak, by resisting Jesus' descriptions of expected suffering and death. Poor Peter. He was attending to Jesus' well-being when he was sharply rebuked. Can we blame him for not wanting Jesus to suffer?

What if we looked at each of today's texts in terms of hospitality, and especially using the abbreviated phrase of "leave room for God?" The actual phrase is to "leave room for the wrath of God," which means, as Paul explains it, that it's not our job to take revenge, but in God's justice and righteousness, God works out vengeance and punishment.

If we "leave room for God," then, like Moses, we can see a bush burning, and have room to see that sometimes God's mysterious ways include using us. If we "leave room for God," then the vengeance Moses tried to take out on a taskmaster 40 years earlier becomes God's way of providing a way out. Leaving room for God can mean a new life instead of clinging to the life we know. Sometimes, we resist when we are content with life, when we think we have life and God figured out: we don't really want to leave room for God—or we can't possibly see how God is among us when certain things happen.

Paul begins this section by saying, "by the mercies of God..." The presence and mystery of God bubble up within us when we are compelled to action, and by the things that make us stop and listen. We have burning issues that we choose to attend to. We see plenty of burning bushes—and our ability to see them and to respond with awareness of God's presence can be defining moments for us, even when we're not looking.

When crisis comes, when changes in life threaten our stability, these are defining moments. From the big things of hearing God's call, following our to the daily things of loving one another with mutual affection, these are defining moments. From theophanies to theodicies—the big things—to the little things of expressions of hospitality or actions that spring from integrity--we have opportunity to rise to the occasion.

That word about humility—the word both in the gospel of Matthew which refers to denying self and in Romans (do not claim to be wiser than you are) --is a good reminder that even if we flunk our defining moments, God's spirit burns within us and around us. After all, even Peter retained his title as the founder of the church, despite Jesus' rebuke. Whatever our other responses might be, we can pray our way through things. Persevering in prayer is one thing we can do. It is a way of leaving room for God.

Thomas Merton, one of my favorite writers, wrote a prayer that can help us address the questions raised by today's texts. Listen to the prayer he wrote:

Prayer of Thomas Merton

My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

- Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Unlike guidelines or rules for English usage, the guidelines for responding to defining moments don't have many handbooks. One suggestion might be simply this: that whatever crisis or opportunity finds you, remember that the "I am" says "I will be with you." Deep in the season of Pentecost as the Spirit stirs and blows and burns, we know that God is with us. And when we remember that, God defines the moment, not us.