



KEEP THE FLAME LIT

Exodus 3:1-14

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A rabbi, a priest, and five Protestant ministers went to Boston to meet with some professors to explore how people experience God. No, it's not a joke, far from it. Instead, it's a trip I went on a few years ago. We went on a three-year journey to learn more about how people of various religions understand the Almighty.

In one sense, this question is as old as humanity itself. As Moses was in the midst of a numinous encounter with God, he attempted to control it by asking for God's name. This would give Moses some parameters to understand this God. The gods prowling about in those days were mostly more nasty, greedy, rapacious, jealous, petty, and violent versions of the humans they were purported to rule over. In some circles, knowing the name of a thing could also give you a type of magical control over it, to dominate it and make it do your will.

Now we take God's response to Moses, "I am" as an answer but I suspect that, in today's world, God might be charged with being non-responsive on a witness stand...

"State your name for the record."

"I am".

God resisted giving out a name, refusing this same request from Jacob because, in one sense, God is beyond naming. A catholic scholar we met on our trip, Thomas Groome, said, "God is not *an* object. Here is a tree. Here is a book. Here is a god. God is the idea beyond nothing which can be conceived."

The desire to put God in a box has been a strong current in our tradition. But, in our modern quest to define God, we have forgotten that in some ways God is beyond metaphor, beyond human language.

In my clergy groups' journey, we encountered the former chaplain at Harvard, Peter Gomes, who understood this and, as a result, he baptized more

adults than many of our churches. The pews at the Harvard Chapel were packed every week despite the fact, or perhaps because, Gomes observes an almost hyper-traditional worship service. Peter Gomes, in the supposed bastion of secular humanism, fills the pews by preaching long sermons ["Sermonettes makes Christianettes," he told us quoting William Sloan Coffin] and giving them the traditional music every service. But there is the encounter with divine, the expectation that God will be present powerfully and amazingly so. Thomas Groome captures such expectancy when he spoke of the Mass – "Observe the Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass."

Despite being in perhaps the most erudite learning institution on the planet, Peter Gomes does not see his task as explaining the nature of God. "We are not to explain the nature of fire but to keep the flame lit...You don't explain how a virgin conceives, you fall on your knees. I want it not to make sense."

Perhaps as Christians our faith makes even less sense than most. For despite believing in the infinitely transcendent nature of the "I am" God, at the same time we profess that this very same God walked this earth and could be found in human likeness. This immense 'I am' reduced to flesh and bones – ridiculous, indeed foolishness to the wisdom of the world "for those who believe, the power of God". Try to explain it, categorize and quantify this event, God being made flesh, and it leads to charges of heresy, to murder and condemnation amongst fellow believers and yet, to experience it as the Roman Guard discovered, leads to the shocking, galling, declaration – "Truly this man is God's Son!"

This is the true beginning of faith. Not clarity, or insight or understanding... but encounter and

wonder and mystery... being gripped by the infinite and undefinable.

It comes often like a freight train running you down in the ordinary moments of life – like Moses tending sheep in the wilderness or with Peter lowering his nets while fishing. But, when it happens, you are ready to change your life, to drop your nets and your livelihood, and follow him to the Cross.

Peter encountered the Christ and then followed him because faith and call are inextricably linked. Faith always has a component of service tied to it.

It is in this place of bewilderment and awe that the call of God comes most powerfully. When, beyond your expectations, you are struck by the hand of God, this mighty and mysterious God, who beyond belief reaches out to little ol' you and little ol' me.

And this call of God we pastors have is not to teach you about God, not really. That treats God like an object, which Thomas Groome rightly objected to, as if we were teaching you the multiplication tables of faith.

Instead the call of God is to point to the source of all that there is...

- ...to point you to those places of mystery and power, of love and forgiveness, of hope and of light

- ...to introduce you to the divine and to show and to shine a light

- ...to find that resonant frequency in your heart that sings, when touched by the Spirit.

It is like those glasses that make beautiful music. When my brothers and I were little, we had to endure many excruciatingly dull dinner parties. My mom loved to invite dozens of friends and parade us out in very uncomfortable clothes.

The only thing that made them mildly tolerable was the chance to play with the crystal goblets. None of us were musicians, but the idea we could simply rub our finger over the top of the glass and make this sublimely beautiful noise was addictive.

In fact, I failed so miserably at trying to learn the saxophone that, when oldest brother Steve showed me how to make beautiful music with the wineglass, I could hardly put it down at those dinner parties... because we could never touch them, otherwise!

The call of a minister is not to make the music through some profound talent, but to engage in the simple things in life that, when done just right, resonate the beautiful presence of the Spirit of God, which is everywhere!

Our task is to make those goblets sing, but the sound is far purer than any of us could produce, because we are trying to tune your heart to hear, not our song, but the pure love of God, the sweetest, most terrifying, the tenderest, most powerful sound any of us will ever know.

But, in truth, the call isn't just for Leslie or me, it is for everyone. It was when my traveling clergy group went to St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama, that I saw this the most clearly.

This abbey is rather typical in most respects, with its few dozen monks praying practically 24 hours a day, offering spiritual support for the local community, and working the land to grow their own food. But this abbey, located in rural Alabama, has a unique collection not found anywhere else in the entire world.

About 50 yards outside of the main complex, Brother Marcus showed us the Ave Maria Grotto which, I must confess, I loved.

Scattered across about a half an acre were hundreds of replicas of some of the greatest sacred buildings of all time. Down one miniature road was St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, down another was the Hagia Sophia, Notre Dame, and St. Peter's Basilica. Each of those buildings was erected out of a deep desire of people to encounter the divine rather than to explain God. Their lofty heights, beautiful windows, and sublime works of art tuned people to the divine frequency, enabling thousands of Holy-Moses-like moments. And, it was incredibly powerful to think about how many

thousands of years and millions of hours that Christians have spent devoting their lives to create such amazing places to the glory of God.

To see them all in one place was a profoundly powerful moment. As we were walking through this marvel, we saw a crusty old curmudgeon hopping around some of the more dilapidated looking buildings. With some conversation, we discovered he had taken it upon himself to preserve these buildings. He was not a brother, but an 84-years-young grounds worker who had spent the past **twenty-eight years** repairing and maintaining the artwork. We asked how he managed to keep all these buildings up and he retorted, “Not with much help I tell you. There’s too much *ora* and not enough *labora* around this place.” He was referring to the plaques that hung over most every entrance in the monastery which simply said, “Ora et Labora”, that is: prayer and work.

This servant of God had no special talent. He didn’t erect a cathedral; he didn’t offer prayers on behalf of the people; he didn’t even make any of these replicas; but, he heard a calling from God to preserve and protect and, because of it, he tuned my heart, and thousands of visitors’ hearts that come there every year, to see and hear the glory of God.

So, God’s call is for all of us. And it’s not to explain, but to keep the flame lit so that we can all feel the warmth of God’s love.