

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Beyond Our Imagination

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By age eleven, John Muir had committed to memory the entirety of the New Testament and three-quarters of the Old Testament. His stern Christian father delighted in such discipline but forbade him from staying up late to study anything else.

As a compromise, the young man would rise early. At 1:00 a.m. Muir began tinkering with a sawmill, thermometers, barometers, complex door-locks, an automatic horse-feeding machine, clocks, a firelighter, and sundry other implements for use in the early 1800's. Earning enough from his inventions, he went off to study engineering. When a fellow student asked him about the locust tree, curiosity compelled him to pick up botany.

Muir left university without a degree and found work as a sawyer in a wagon wheel factory. A year later, while repairing a belt for a circular saw, a file slipped and struck his eye. He spent six weeks in a dark room, not knowing if he would ever see again.

When his sight returned, he saw the world with fresh eyes and wrote,

“It was from this time that my long continuous wanderings may be said to have fairly commenced. I bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God.”

Muir walked from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, then from San Francisco to the Sierra Nevada and later founded the Sierra Club.¹

In our summer sermon series, *The Majesty of God*, with the foundation of scripture, we hope to bring the same curiosity and wonder as Muir; to explore God's created order, in living beings, communities, human inventions, and to spark our imaginations.

The first book in scripture opens with "In the beginning...God said, let *there be*..." Let *there be* light. Let *there be* heavenly bodies. *Let us make* humankind. God breathed life into being.

I purposefully stress the verb *to be*. That abstract verb we take for granted, with all the varied verb tenses of *to be*; I am, you are, we have been, he will be. All imply possibility and becoming. God unleashes creation to be. And God remains intimate throughout.

Further in the Book of Genesis, God walks in a garden. God approaches Abraham's tent in three human-like forms and receives hospitality. Later, God intervenes to save Isaac's life and again, promises generations yet to be. Later still, God wrestles with Jacob in the desert and changes Jacob's life and name to Israel, from which the people of Israel descend.

¹ *The Writers' Almanac*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/twa-the-writers-almanac-for-april-21-2022/>

As the Old Testament progresses, God's interaction in creation and with people becomes more mysterious and transformative. As the people of God grow, mature, and then get in trouble, God's power continues to surprise even the most faithful with salvation.

Turning to our reading today, in the Book of Exodus, the Israelites are enslaved by Pharaoh.

Here we meet Moses. Running from Pharaoh, Moses retreated to a mountain. At this point, Moses' idea of the future is limited to merely finding grass for his sheep, not a better way for himself or anyone else. He thinks it safest to be just as he is.

Dear God, humble us to realize that in order to know you, we first need to unknow you. Help us shed those neat conceptions that limit you and in turn limit us. Breathe your spirit into these words that your energy blazes in our hearts, never consumes us, instead fuels us to move into a future, becoming what pleases you. Amen.

Listen for God's living word as I read selected verses.

Exodus 3:1-15

...Moses drove his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.

²There 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. ³Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.”

⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “*Here I am.*” ⁵Then God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶God 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.

⁷Then 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, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey...

¹⁰Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹²God said, “I will be with you...”¹³And 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... 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.

Moses was busy making himself useful on the surface of things – tending sheep, staying safe, marrying, living out his days with family and field. His life of predictability changed as a bush burst into flames and God’s voice rang out. To ease Moses’ terror, God names all the patriarchs of faith Moses would recognize.

I am the God of Abraham. God of Isaac. God of Jacob. Handed down through the ages, Moses knew the stories of God meeting these men when they were alone and in the wilderness.

All of them decided to do as God commanded, not based solely on the past, but trusting God’s future promises. Each led the people of Israel to more expansive and generous ways of life. Each bequeathed to future generations the fact that God goes before us, leading us into a future beyond imagination.

Trusting in the past, Moses knows God cares about the people. But, when told to bring the people from bondage to a

land of milk and honey, Moses remains mired in what he believes are his humble limits.

He considers himself only a shepherd and fugitive and questions: Who am I do to do this?

The fiery flame before him says, “I will be with you.”

Now, turning the table, Moses asks, “Who are you?” In other words, are you enough?

Then God’s particular description “I am the God of...” pegged to a person and place in history, moves to the most mysterious name in all of scripture: “I am who I am.” A single translation into English fails the ancient Hebrew. Listen to this collection of God’s name as translated by Hebrew scholars.

God said, “I will be who I will be.”

“I am who endures.”

“I am who brings all things into being.”

Lastly, this translation is perhaps the most persuasive, “My nature will become evident from my actions.”²

² *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berline and Marc Zvi Brettler, consulting ed. Michael Fishbane, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 111-112. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, Vol 1* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

Can you imagine how stymied Moses must have been? Obviously, this encounter thoroughly convinced him to do the work God commands, return to the heart of danger, and convince the Israelites to risk their lives as well for a God with an obtuse name; I am who I am.

On a side note, when you think about the Exodus story, would they have believed a god who rains down frogs and parts seas?

The people believed. God remains with Moses and God delivers them to the land of milk and honey.

Moses stepped beyond what he thought possible about God, and he became more than a simple shepherd and fugitive. Through God, he becomes the great prophet. In the grand story of faith, God became more as well. God's "I am" name expands in Exodus to include "I am the God who led you out of the land of slavery" reminding them when needed to push them further. God's son picks up this refrain of "I am" as Jesus says "I am the good shepherd. I am the bread of life."

God's choice of such an ambiguous name points us not only to God's expansive nature, but it also points to one of God's greatest creations – our human imagination.

We define our lives and what we know based upon our ability to grasp and name and understand it. Whatever *it* is. For example: mountains, water, the sun and moon and stars, the love that swells in our hearts to tend children, the force of

nature that pulls an apple to the ground rather than allow it to float in the air.

Our curiosity pushes us to learn and as soon as we grasp things and ideas, and name them, we move on, secure in what we know. Almost like something we possess. And yet, when we encounter things or people or ideas that defy our ability to name them, “put our finger on it,” so to say, it niggles in the back of our minds.

Psychologists call this the Zeigarnik effect after the German woman whose research proved unfinished tasks gnaw at us. They stay in our minds. After the spark of a new idea, have you ever asked, “where did that come from?”

Anything ambiguous, amorphous ideas, or unfinished projects, keep our attention. I liked one part of the definition: “loose ends prevail.”³

God places within us an imagination to be captivated by the possibility of what we do not know. God almost teases us with the desire to move forward without a complete picture of what comes next, and in our faith history, we can trust good

³ Consistent with the concept of the Zeigarnik effect, I recall hearing about this on a podcast, found it interesting, and tucked it away, or so I thought. It kept surfacing again in my wanderings, particularly while writing this sermon. Yet, I could not find the original inspiration. The internet abounds with information and examples. Here are a couple: [What Is the Zeigarnik Effect? Definition and Examples \(thoughtco.com\)](http://www.thoughtco.com), [Zeigarnik effect - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeigarnik_effect).

things always prevail as we move towards God. And that we become more.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, all those prophets, the disciples, and the early church, all decided to follow God into a future beyond their imagination.

Now it is decision time for us. A place to start is considering how we refer to God.

Scripture describes God as YHWH, Abba, and father. God is the still small voice. The silence in the wind. An eagle. A mother bear. Isaiah consistently refers to God as a mother. The mother hen who gathers her brood. Ever use one of those images?⁴

If you only think of God in one word or at only certain times, does it limit God?

On this Father's Day, I trust many of you have spoken to God in prayer as father, a comforting, trusting entity. If that image of God is the reality of your father's care, you are blessed. What about those for whom the image of father implies judgment, disappointment, abuse, or neglect? I'm sorry, I hope you find a different word and image.

⁴ The PC(USA) published a resource guide many years ago to encourage expansive language for God, appropriately called "Well Chosen Words;" wellchosenwords.pdf (pcusa.org)

Can you conceive of God as a black woman? That's how God appears in the popular book, *The Shack*. My Asian ministry colleagues consistently share images of Jesus and Mary that their children can identify with.

As I speak now, at our denomination's General Assembly, our stated clerk J. Herbert Nelson, a black man, is preaching on Isaiah 6 "here I am, send me" to celebrate Juneteenth. We can anticipate Nelson will speak to God's capacity to be present in all places and lead us forward. More than ten years ago, our denomination published language to expand the ways we refer to God, moving beyond male-centric only words.

In Pride month, celebrating God's diverse creation of people who identify as LGBTQ and more, can we imagine how they might teach us?

What about pronouns? Throughout scripture, the Holy Spirit is always she, even in ancient Hebrew.

Several weeks ago, the First Presbyterian Church of Englewood youth led worship and decided to refer to God's expansive nature with the pronoun "they."

All of these names and ideas could disrupt your conception of God.

This might challenge your understanding and invite you to imagine more from God. And perhaps if God becomes

expansive, you can as well? And the others whom God made in God's image. When we look at the world, employing this tremendous gift of imagination, to be, to become, all of God's creation becomes even more majestic.



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