

# *God and God-Talk*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**  
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**Reading:**

*Exodus 3:1-14 (Revised Standard Version)*

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "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.

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." He said, "But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain."

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of our fathers has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

**Sermon:**

Friday afternoon at the garage sale, I made my last sale -- a fine Ping Pong table -- and the buyer, a young black woman, was delighted before taking off. As we hauled parts of it out to her car, I remarked to a fellow worker, "I've gotta write that sermon sometime." Clearly surprised, the buyer asked, "You the pastor?" "Yes," I said. Before pulling away, she called back, "What you preaching about?" I thought, *Forget the "God-talk" part*, and called back to her, "God." "That's a good thing," she said, and hopped in her car. We waved goodbye.

You will agree, I hope: That's a good thing to be preaching about, especially on this Palm Sunday, in this week when the Jewish Passover also begins. Why do we repeat these ancient biblical stories? Not because they tell us what we must think, but rather -- once we recognize that they are legends, embedded in a sacred tradition that is our own -- because they expand and enliven and deepen what we can think. What better example than the story of Moses, a story that invited black slaves in America to believe in their own liberation -- as the spiritual "Go Down Moses" richly attests.

We are told that Moses was a Hebrew, raised as an Egyptian prince; in fact, his father was probably an Egyptian, since his name is Egyptian. (Think of it: the chief Jew, half-Egyptian.) Still today, in Judaism, one's religion is inherited not from the father but the mother. Moses went out one day and saw an Egyptian overlord beating a Hebrew. He looked this way and that and, seeing no one, killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.

The day after, the story tells, he stepped forward to intervene in a fight and make peace between two Hebrews: "Why do you strike our fellow?" he demanded. But the man replied, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" So the story was out, and in fear of discovery, Moses fled the land, going east into the land of Midian. There he married Zipporah, and tended the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro.

It was in the wilderness of Midian that Moses was confronted with the burning bush -- burning, yet unconsumed -- not a natural event but a miraculous apparition, we are meant to understand. Here for the first time Yahweh identifies himself, by name, and identifies himself with "the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Here, from this moment, Moses becomes the prototype of the prophet: one who speaks truth to power.

Now, if I call Yahweh "he," it is only because that is the gender of this ancient storied God, just as Zeus is "he" and Athena is "she." The language of gender comes with the language of the myths, which are stories of the gods. No wonder we struggle and disagree around questions of God-language! I say: Don't throw out the myth, but treat it like an atom of some unknown substance. As you must split the atom, you must break open, or perhaps "de-myth," the myth to release its bound-up energy.

What does the voice from the unconsumed burning bush say? The voice of God announces his will: to bring this people out of slavery in Egypt. It is an act of liberation that will allow a new community, a covenant people, to emerge from the shadows of history. Even before this Yahweh is a law-giver, he is a liberator. As we read on in the story, we come to the famous words, "Go and tell Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'" You see, this God cannot act alone, if he is to act in history; he must have a prophet to announce his purpose, his meaning.

(I know -- this is difficult. We have largely lost the sense that history has any purpose at all, that history is the story of ... of anything. I say: History is the story of freedom, agonized by the global struggle for justice, much as the Exodus story teaches.)

Moses is the reluctant prophet. He is not looking for glory and fame. He tries to beg off. He says, "Look, God, I'm not all that eloquent a public speaker, that I should make pronunciamentos to Pharaoh?" Yahweh replies, "Not to worry. I'll be there and I'll help you find the words you need when you need them." I believe ... in the presence of transcendence.

It's as if this mysterious God, though unknowable in his inner being, is to be made known in history by what he seeks, what he intends, what he demands. After this, the history of God-talk is changed decisively. We do not know who or what this sovereign sacred Power is, but we do know the directive in history that he sets. It is to create a new community among an already ancient people. (Is that not our task, in the Unitarian Church in Summit, in the years immediately before us?) As we retell this story, we make it our own.

Then Moses would seem to be the original "liberation theologian," a very humanistic sort of theist, or a very theistic sort of humanist. In this sense: that this Yahweh in whose name he prophesies seeks to liberate this people to their full humanity. Although unknown, although ultimately unknowable, this God is to be known in the struggle to make and keep human life human. In this perspective, God-talk is no longer speculation about the existence of a hypothetical divine being, a god who may or may not exist, "out there." Rather, it is reflection, argument, discussion, and all the rest of what we do best (we Unitarians being talkers par excellence) on the true directive of our personal lives and our shared, communal history.

Theism and atheism, God or no-God, are no longer the question. The question is inauthentic vs. authentic faith, devotion to idols (like absolute, Pharaohic power) or devotion to the liberating and community-forming Power.

God remains a subject of perplexed thought and passionate feeling among us. Some call ourselves humanists and some theists. And some also lay claim to the polytheistic or pagan view, the view that there are many divine spirits and forces. And when one side seems to be prevailing over the others, a great anxiety wells up in the system. Recently it has been the humanists among us who felt that their rationalist tradition was being shunted aside, in favor of a sticky tide of something called "spirituality" -- maybe a theistic or a Christian spirituality, more likely an "Earth-based" spirituality. In the face of all this, I'm a bit old-fashioned. I say that the best of religious liberalism has always stood for a rational and ethical understanding of universal and ancient religious traditions, drenched in God-talk as they are. Therefore we can never be done with God-talk -- nor can we forever evade it with each other or with our children -- even while we can never be satisfied with it, even while it is never adequate to the task.

Human ideals and ethics are not self-authenticating. They are necessarily rooted in something that transcends them. Paradoxically, they are validated only as they are relativized. It is precisely the distorting vision, the moral astigmatism of humanity that religion -- self-critical religion, liberal religion -- is centrally concerned with overcoming.

Authentic faith is a form of self-transcendence, a way of correcting and surpassing ourselves.

Just so, the most powerful religious stories have something in common: the element of surprise, the contradiction of expectations, the dawning moment of moral and spiritual insight. You may recall the wonderful story of "The Rabbi in the Attic" that I told last fall. The young, new rabbi Miriam Bloomgarten considers old Rabbi Heckler a total roadblock to her plans for the synagogue -- until, one early autumn evening, she climbs an ash tree to get a peek in his attic window and see what he does up there. He prays!

The tree is golden with the rays of the evening sun. She feels it aflame; it is her burning bush, through which she discovers that Rabbi Heckler is a man of pure-hearted devotion, a man rejected and despised by the synagogue leaders for no other reason than he is too old-fashioned. Marion's sudden new understanding -- of the old man and how she must, finally, not join in his destruction but co-exist with him -- comes to her as an epiphany -- a moment of correcting and surpassing of herself. Some of the best God-talk never mentions the word "God."

According to Rumi, the Muslim mystic, "God is the denial of denials." In algebra, a negative times a negative yields a positive: So too in religion, the negation of the spirit of negation, a radical turnabout of the human spirit, signals a new affirmation. A meditation by Jacob Trapp:

The most important word in our language is yes.  
It matters what we say yes to.  
It matters what we say no to.  
Every no gets its value from the yes it also affirms.  
To say no to what denies and destroys, is also  
to say yes to what affirms, builds, creates.  
God, said Nathan Soederblom, is the everlasting yes of existence.

Sometimes you have to pass through the utter despair of self-negation before you can emerge on the other side, joining your "yes" to "the everlasting yes of existence." Blaise Pascal, the mathematician and aphoristic theologian, said this: "Notwithstanding the sight of all our miseries, which press upon and take us by the throat, we have this instinct which we cannot repress and which lifts us up." Something there is that rescues us from ourselves, and sometimes uplifts us in joyful surprise.

Whoever takes religion seriously will stumble, sooner or later, into the problem of religious language generally, and the problem of God-talk in particular: God-talk is always hopelessly inadequate to its task. Its object always eludes definition. In fact, we do not trust those who speak as if their particular words and concepts are the only true words and concepts. And yet, to foreswear this discussion, to be done with all God-talk, is to cut the nerve of religion itself. We are never done with the quest for better words of faith, words that resonate with our most profound experience of life.

"The language of religion," said Dag Hammarskjöld, the great and tragic secretary-general of the United Nations, "registers a basic religious experience." More often than the word "God," in his classic of contemporary spirituality, "Markings," Hammarskjöld uses the word of sacred personal relationship: "Thou." Religious language, he said, "must not be regarded as describing in philosophical terms the reality which is accessible to the senses and which we can analyze with the tools of logic. I was late in understanding what that meant," he said. But once he did, once he had turned from seeking rational answers to the existential condition of his own life, he began what he called "the longest journey, the journey inward." As I have said, the way to God is in and through the human spirit.

These insights are already embedded in this ancient story, the story that tells how it is that the first Passover came to be. Moses asks this X-unknown God for his name, his calling card. "For when I go to Pharaoh, how shall I say who it is that has sent me, with this rather brassy demand, 'Let my people go'?" The voice answers: "I am who I am. Tell them 'I am' has sent you." "Gee, thanks," Moses said, "that makes it perfectly clear!"

Nobody knows precisely how to translate these words from the ancient Hebrew. This alternative has been proposed: "I shall be what I shall be. Tell them 'I shall be' has sent you." I like this alternative because it suggests that the unknown God is to be known in the historical struggles that fulfill the divine directive. And what is that directive? Whatever points toward the enlargement of human freedom within the global covenant of mutual respect and care. Whatever does not diminish our humanity but enlarges it, and makes it true.