

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday of Lent

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Text: Exodus 3:1-14

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing the Great I Am”

I still remember the excitement of the race to the moon. Most of you probably do too? Remember the Apollo 11 mission launched by a Saturn V rocket? The huge billowing plumes beneath the missile like spacecraft as its engines ignited. The slow rise as it made its way into the blue sky. The video shots of the craft as it disconnected from various segments as it shrunk in size in order to shed weight to make it possible to make it the 240,000 or so mile journey to the moon. It took about 4 days from launch to landing on the moon. It was almost magical. To think we had the capacity as human beings to finally literally touch the moon. Amazing!

Maybe that’s why I’ve been so enamored with space, because as child growing up in that era it was part of the wonder we had about what was out there, and how cool it was that there were people actually exploring it.

About 8 years after Apollo 11, NASA launched Voyager 1 on September 5, 1977. It is a robotic spacecraft on a mission to study the outer Solar System. As it reached the outer edges of our solar system, engineers turned it around on February 14, 1990—25 years and 8 days ago today—and they took a photograph of the earth. It looked like this. (Show “Pale Blue Dot”.)

The photograph came to be known as the “Pale Blue Dot”, and it demonstrates the vastness of the universe, when you consider that this is just within our solar system: that is one star—the sun—around which planets revolve make up a solar system.

Our solar system in turn is part of a galaxy known as the Milky Way. In that galaxy it’s estimated that there are between 100-400 billion stars. How many of those stars have planets revolving around them we don’t know for sure. Scientists say, though, that if Voyager 1 was traveling at the speed of light, it would take 100,000 years to cross our galaxy.

Then the question is, how many galaxies are there? Again, we don’t know for sure. An article in National Geographic claims that “the observable universe alone may contain 100 billion. Some of these distant systems are similar to our own Milky Way galaxy, while others are quite different.

“Galaxies with less than a billion stars are considered "small galaxies." In our own galaxy, the sun is just one of about 100 billion stars.”

[\(http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/space/universe/galaxies-article/\)](http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/space/universe/galaxies-article/)

So we have our “Pale Blue Dot” that’s part of a single solar system, that’s part of a galaxy, that’s one of maybe 100 billion galaxies, those with less than a billion stars being considered “small”. Makes me dizzy thinking about it.

Thinking the other way now, how many cells do you think make up your body? According to National Geographic, that too is not a simple matter of counting. It’s a matter of estimating which researchers did by breaking the body up by organs. They then researched scientific literature for details on the volume and density of cells in gallbladders, knee joints, intestines, bone marrow, and many other tissues. They then came up with estimates for the total number of each kind of cell. They estimate, for example, that we have 50 billion fat cells and 2 billion heart muscle cells. Adding up all their numbers, the scientists came up with 37.2 trillion cells. That does not include microbes and other cells not deemed to be strictly human cells. And let’s not even talk about the size of an atom and how many atoms make up a molecule, how many molecules make up.... Again, makes me dizzy thinking about it.

But there’s something here about the meaning of life, about awe, about God’s infinite power and grace, about God’s incredible creative power that can result in such vastness we cannot comprehend and correspondingly the minutia of life that we cannot see or fully comprehend, all of which people of faith trust God created, all of which we believe is of God. But what does it all mean? Great, we’ve got all these numbers. There is vastness and minutia that make our heads spin if we think about it all. God the Creative Spirit behind all of it, but what difference does it make in my life and your life? What difference does it make for the world?

I think of Moses out on Mt. Sinai—which is also known as Horeb in the OT--taking care of the sheep. Out in what seemed to be the vastness of the wilderness where there is little but rock and dust. A monastery now stands on Mt. Sinai. We have a photograph of it. You can see it’s a barren place. Nothing much to inspire on the surface. I imagine Moses on this barren mountain at night with his sheep looking into the sky from that “Pale Blue Dot” seeing the same stars, the same moon we see when we peer into the vastness of space.

So he is out there in this barren wilderness, watching the same stars and moon that we see in the night skies, tending the sheep of his father-in-law. Exodus says that he went beyond the wilderness to the mountain of God which suggests that Moses went out of his way looking for God because why else would you go to a place like this? Moses was in search of God.

Have you ever been in search of God? Knowing there is something more to life than what it might appear? Maybe that’s why you’re here this morning because you know instinctively that there is more to life than taking care of the business of life, sensing that there is Mystery and Meaning beyond our knowing and so we search. We search because we know there is more to life than just tending the sheep.

Moses was in search of God, and as he tended his sheep, doing the work he needed to do but being open to whatever might come his way, he had an inexplicable experience: a bush that burns but is not consumed. This Mystery draws Moses in. He decides to take a closer look. He decides to open himself to whatever it is that is behind this strange sight. So rather than run from

that which he does not understand, Moses turns toward it. In some ways you could say that he was engaging in a practice of Lent. Lent is the season between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday during which Christians have prepared for Easter. One of the ways in which preparation for Easter is done is by repenting, which means to turn around toward God. In other words, Lent is a time to reorient our lives away from those things that keep us from God and rededicate our lives to a relationship with God. It's a time of self-examination, forgiveness & mercy. It is a time to turn from those pursuits that keep us from being who God created us to be and turn toward God again. Moses does so as he steps toward this strange sight.

As he does, he hears a voice call his name: "Moses! Moses!" Notice that Moses first gets close enough to hear. He could have chosen to keep moving. He could have ignored the sight and just passed it off as some phenomenon that was interesting but had nothing for him. Instead he gets close enough to hear the voice of God. When he does so, it's clear God already knows him because God calls him by name.

One of the things I learned in the Dale Carnegie class I took years ago is that the one sound we all like to hear above all others is the sound of our names. It's the way we connect with one another, a way in which we are known. Our names identify us.

Moses listens as God tells him to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. This is sacred space, sacred time, a place and time in which the Mystery of the vast universe is revealed. This God, it is clear, wants to be known, wants to be in relationship with human beings. Maybe the sandal removal is an expression of vulnerability. That is, in a place like the wilderness, without foot protection a person is vulnerable to injury with the rocks and the dust and dirt of the mountain. Removing sandals is a sign of trust, a willingness to be vulnerable with God. Moses exposes himself to the possibility of injury but trusts God enough to do so.

In this vulnerable state, God tells Moses that God has a job for him, that God has seen the suffering of the Hebrew people in their enslavement, that God wants to change that and Moses is the man for the job. Moses, like the rest of us, has some excuses for God. He really is a nobody. He can't speak well. God counters those by saying simply "I will be with you." But Moses isn't ready to jump on board with God's plans quite yet. He is human, after all, and God is asking him to work against one of the most powerful men in the world at the time: Pharaoh. So we can understand his hesitancy.

So Moses asks, "If I do this and the people ask me the name of who sent me, what am I going to tell them?" Moses understands the power of knowing names, too. God replies, "Tell them 'I am who I am'. Tell them 'I am' sent you." The Hebrew for this name "I am who I am" is "Yahweh", and when devout Jews come across this name when they read scripture, they will not pronounce it. It's too holy, too sacred. Instead they say "Adonai".

As I was reading this story of the holy Yahweh once again for this morning, I thought to myself, "Lord, if I were Moses I would want some plans for what you are asking me to do. How am I going to influence someone as powerful as the Pharaoh to let the slaves go free? What is the strategy, Lord? Do I organize small groups of people to begin a non-violent campaign? Should we write up some posters? Do we network with the people around Pharaoh and try to influence him through them? What is your strategy, Lord, and what specifically do you want me to do?"

But instead all Moses gets is "I am who I am, and I will be with you. Now go!"

One of the reasons we're spending time during this season of Lent in this series on the "I am" sayings in the Bible is that this vast, infinite God of the universe is also personal and desires

to be known by us. God knows Moses' name and provides Moses with God's own name. God wants to be known. This is why God came to us in the person of Jesus. That is why we'll be spending time exploring the "I am" sayings of Jesus because those sayings--"I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine, the way, the resurrection and the life"—Jesus draws from the practical parts of life at that time, so that those who hear can see and know the presence of God now, in this life. What if these symbols of the "I am" mean that God can be experienced in the ordinary world? What if Jesus used them to help us see that the great "I am who I am" is already among us and you and I are invited, encouraged, to "step aside and see this great sight"?

One of the passages I think about when I think about the vastness of the universe and the complexity of our existence is a passage from the book of Acts in which Paul is preaching to the Athenians on Mars Hill. Paul is working to persuade them that Christ is God's Son, the one true God, and in doing so, Paul tells them:

'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17:28)

We are in this vast universe of God's, the great "I am who I am". We live and move and have our being in this universe. We are part of it as was Moses and Jesus and all of those who have gone before as will those who come after us. God always has been, is now and always will be. What if God is in every moment of every day inviting us to be open to God's presence? What if Jesus' "I am" sayings are simply different ways of saying "I want to be in relationship with you. I want you to know me because I already know you"?

I invite you into this six-week journey of being open to God. Each Sunday we'll explore another "I am" saying of Jesus from the Gospel According to John from now through Easter. If you haven't already done so, I invite you to join one of the small groups exploring the same "I am" sayings we'll be talking about in worship because they not only teach us about God, but they also have something to teach us about us. In fact, maybe a step in that direction might be for you to complete the sentence "I am..." How would you complete that sentence for yourself? And then imagine if God completed that sentence for you? How would your list compare to God's.

We are part of a vast creation and yet loved and known by God who created it all. When we are able to be open enough to listen, God calls us because God has always called someone when there are needs in the world. God calls people when change needs to happen, when needs are unmet, when suffering needs to be relieved, when justice needs to be done. And when we willingly respond God frees us, too. Frees us for joy, and meaning and purpose beyond tending sheep and taking care of our own business. When we respond to God's voice we become connected the Mystery of God's power and that in itself is a gift.