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Pentecost Proper 18A
Peace, Seattle
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Exodus 3:1-15

BURNING BUSH PART TWO: THE CALL

"**Spiritual, but not religious"** has become a catch phrase in contemporary America.

To say "I'm spiritual but not religious" means I don't need organized religion to lead a life of faith.

To say "I'm spiritual but not religious" means I believe in a Higher Power, but don't feel the need to define that Higher Power or have it conform to the tenets of a particular system of belief.

To say "I'm spiritual but not religious" means I'm open to—and may even long for—spiritual experiences for their own sake, but I don't want those experiences evaluated by some one else's religious standard.

A 2009 survey by the research firm LifeWay Christian Resources, found that 72% of Americans aged 18 to 29 claimed they were "more spiritual than religious." The phrase is now so commonplace that it's spawned its own acronym and Facebook page: **SBNR.org**.[1]

Now, I'm not into bashing SBNR people. There's an impulse there I understand—and a healthy skepticism about organized religion that, given the history of religion, ain't a bad thing to have.

Yet, at the same time, I—who have chosen to align myself to a particular confession of faith—find myself wondering, Where's the commitment in being "spiritual but not religious"? Where's the accountability? Where's the community that will help you rise above self-interest, sustain you after the spiritual experiences dry up, prompt you to engage the world for the sake of the last, the least, and the lost?

And so the debate goes…

I think our text today sheds some light on this conversation, of what it means to be in relationship with God, and how we live out of that relationship in the world. Our point of departure for that conversation, once again, is the story from Exodus.

Last week, in part one of this two sermon series, we explored the first half of the story of Moses' encounter with God at the Burning Bush.

We traced the story of how Moses, a child of Hebrew slaves, came of age within Pharaoh's own household, and how his eyes were opened to the oppression of his people by Pharaoh's regime. We recalled how, after killing an Egyptian overseer for abusing a Hebrew slave, Moses became a fugitive and how his escape from Egypt ushered in a new chapter of his life, as a husband, father, and sheepherder.

On a day that started out like any other, while he herded sheep in the hills, something off the path caught Moses' attention—a bush that appeared to burn yet was not consumed. When Moses turned aside, turned off the path to check out this sight, he heard a voice call to him, a voice, it turns out, which belongs to none other than God Almighty.

[1] From an article by John Blake at CNN Living: http://articles.cnn.com/2010-06-03/living/spiritual.but.not.religious_1_spiritual-community-religious-god?_s=PM:LIVING

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We pick up the story this week at the point where God and Moses begin their conversation.

WARNING: here's where popular culture's versions of the encounter between Moses and God can get in the way of what the text really portrays.

So if you've got Charlton Heston walking around in your head right now, (a la Cecile B. DeMille's TEN COMMANDMENTS[2]), or the DreamWorks cartoon version of the burning bush scene,[3] (which, by the way, comes stunningly close to DeMille's take on it), then I invite you to put them aside for a moment—while I suggest a quite different take, and suggest it in the form of a question borrowed from my friend David Lose:

> What if this passage, "isn't about a timid exile's reverent first meeting with the God of his ancestors, but rather a story about a no-holds-barred encounter between a wily, even conniving outlaw and a God who's more than up to the challenge of transforming him into an instrument of salvation."[4]

Let's go to the scene, where God starts the conversation:

GOD: I'VE SEEN MY PEOPLE'S MISERY; I'VE HEARD THEIR CRIES, AND I FEEL THEIR PAIN. I'VE COME TO DELIVER THEM FROM THEIR SUFFERING AND TO GIVE THEM A FUTURE WITH HOPE…

Then, unfortunately for Moses, the pronouns take an abrupt turn in verse 10:

GOD: AND I'VE FOUND JUST THE MAN I NEED TO CARRY OUT MY PLAN—YOU! ***[Gulp!]***

It's then that the real battle, and the excuses, begin.

Moses: WHO AM I THAT I SHOULD GO TO PHARAOH?

GOD: DON'T YOU WORRY, I'VE GOT A PLAN.

Moses: BUT WHAT IF I GET THERE, AND THE ISRAELITES ARE A TAD BIT SKEPTICAL ABOUT ALL THIS GOOD NEWS, TO THE POINT OF ASKING JUST WHO THIS GOD IS WHO SENT ME. WHAT SHOULD I TELL THEM?

It seems like an innocuous question—and totally reasonable—it really does…

> **"Except that it's not. Instead, it's a total power play; subtle, even sly, to be sure, but a power play none the less.**
>
> "Everything at this point [in God's story] hinges on names and, particularly, the power of names to reveal the character of a person. Remember Jacob, the heel… who received his name because he was grabbing his brother's heel as they came out of the womb and never stopped grabbing for all that he could the rest of his life, until he wrestled this same God to a draw and was given the new, life-transforming name of Israel.
>
> "That is what's going on here. **Moses isn't asking for a calling card**, he's trying to wile the name out of this divine being because to know its name is to have a certain power over it. And this is what makes God's answer so perfect: **"I AM WHO I AM!"**
>
> [In other words,] **"Don't box me in, Moses!"**

God refuses to be hemmed in by our notions of who God is.

But that's not all! There's more.

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[2] Learn more about the 1956 film version of *The Ten Commandments* at Wikipedia link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ten_Commandments_(1956_film)
[3] The 1998 animated musical from DreamWorks studio, *The Prince of Egypt*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prince_of_Egypt
[4] David Lose, in his online article @ Working Preacher.org: http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=504 .

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> "…the divine name [God reveals here] has a future cast to it as well, [which makes God's response to Moses even more elusive:] ***"I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE."***
>
> What is God actually saying when God says, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE? Perhaps something like this: You can't really know who I AM unless you're willing to sign on for my mission in the world. To come into relationship with God, to know God **you have to go with God.** [5]
>
> **Put another way: "Faith is a full contact, participation sport.**
> You just can't sit back and expect to really know God, you have to get up off the couch and get in the game, take a risk, try something marvelous, reach for something you thought unachievable, step out onto the winding road, the end of which you can't see from your doorstep."[6]

A general call to be God's servant never happens…it's always a specific call to a specific task for a specific purpose.

Moses' spiritual encounter at the burning bush wasn't spiritual experience for its own sake; rather the spiritual experience was tethered to a call, and that call was specific: a call to be God's agent for the liberation of God's people from Egyptian slavery.

Where do you believe God might be calling you?

Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[7] There's a start.

What is the deep gladness you carry in you? What task might God be preparing you for? What way of putting that deep gladness to work at the junction with the world's deep hunger?

What path are your feet being set upon? What mission individually and what mission together?

To know God, we have to go with God. And that going starts here, where God calls your name, at the font, and at the table. Here he meets us, just as he promised, and calls us once more to be Christ for one another, and for the world. Amen.

Prayer: O Lord God, you have called her servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage. Not knowing where we go, but that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[5] David Lose, Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC.*