

Third Sunday in Lent 2016
Ex 3:1-15/1 Cor 10:1-13/Lk 13:1-9
St. Augustine's
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IN OTHER WORDS

In Jewish tradition, it is taught that every human being is given a fixed number of words. Our lifespan is not dependent upon the quantity of vitamins we take or the hours of exercise or even the number of our good deeds.

It's about words. When we use them up...we're used up. Gone. And you may have x amount and I may have $x+1$, but neither of us know what our allotment is.

In other words...this is the equation, at least for some of us: Chattiness does not equal long life. Neither will long sermons. I'll try not to risk it.

Funny thing about this is that God, except in relatively few encounters, isn't very chatty, either. Much like what we know of the universe, God is often silent in the Holy Scriptures. We do not hear God in dialogue with humans very often. We do in Genesis, when there weren't many humans to talk to anyway, and when God speaks to the prophets, who God is always trying to convince to do what they don't want to do, don't believe they can do, and wish God would go away. If the *Torah Times* were a daily newspaper then, or had a Twitter account, it might say: "God Appears: Bad News to Follow."

Or, at least, confusing news. Mysterious news. News that doesn't follow the narrative arc that is, thanks to the playwrights of ancient Greece, second nature to us now. First, we are introduced to a problem. Then the problems builds, it increases, it gathers complications and challenges. Finally, the problem is resolved, preferably with a happy ending if not for all, then at least for the main character. Not only do we want our stories to read like this, I know I often think my life should, too, because *I am* the main character, *I am* the most important character and of course I desire and deserve only the best possible ending.

What is the response of the Torah to this? Ha ha ha.

The sense of time in the Hebrew Bible is not that of the Greeks, and it is not ours today. Endings cannot be distinguished from beginnings. Verbs describe events that were, that are, or that will be, sometimes with clarity, other times not. Punctuation doesn't exist. No periods, no commas, no question marks, no exclamation points. The story, in other words, goes on and on and on, in a stream we can enter today just as it was entered thousands of years ago, and beyond. This is a living story.

I am risking my life saying all of these words leading up to a few words -- okay, more than a few -- about today's portion from the Book of Exodus because it will be helpful, I hope, in explaining one word. *The* word. The holiest word in the Hebrew language, in the Jewish faith, the name of the God shared by Jews and Christians. Its usual translation in English is LORD, or LORD GOD. A word that isn't a word, that

can't be pronounced, that is a verb and not a noun, that is our beginning and will be our end.

So, let us begin. Moses meets God. A clarification: We all meet God. Moses' first achievement is that he *knows* he is meeting God. If we follow the classic story, this is the first stage: introduction of the problem.

Second, the challenges come. It isn't enough for God that Moses recognizes something beyond and greater than himself. God gives him a job.

I send you to Pharaoh. Bring my people out of Egypt.

This is asking a lot on a first date.

Moses, like all the prophets, responds quite rationally.

Who am I that I should bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt?

In other words...are you nuts?! Free a nation of slaves from the most powerful of nations? Without an army? And, by the way, who *are* you? What is your name?

In other words...who are you, really? After all, Moses may have been dumbfounded but he wasn't dumb. At the burning bush, God told him: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.* And there were other names for God, too, that Moses surely knew.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh. This grammatically incoherent answer is the best that God can do. Written in Hebrew, it is unpronounceable, except, perhaps, to God. Its meaning has kept Bible scholars in business for almost 3,000 years. The usual translations are: I Am who I Am, or I Shall Be Howsoever-I-Will-Be-There, or simply I Shall Be.

Then God tops it all off by saying: *Ehyeh* sends Moses to the Children of Israel. "I Shall Be" or "I Am" sends Moses.

In other words...it is as if the most erudite, sophisticated, smartest person you know came up to you -- and grunted. Worse yet, she expected you to be impressed, and from this grunt to go forth to risk your life, and that of all your people, on the basis of a...grunt.

This could be an insult, yes. But it could also be a profound compliment.

"You know as much as I do," she might be thinking. "Well, almost as much. You know my heart and my desires, so why do you need my words, too?"

Moses recognized who was the smartest person in the room, and "got it." Not that he stopped questioning God, even if Moses' problems continued to mount through liberation and wandering and rebellion of the very people he served. How does the story of Moses end?

By death. He never crossed over into the land of milk and honey. Maybe he used up his words. Or maybe he was ready to become one with the I Am / the I-Shall-Be.

A bittersweet ending. Or was it? Perhaps it was a beginning. Of the Jewish people finding a home, of the birth of David, the Shepherd who became King, whose descendant we know as the Word who became Flesh. Jesus, the incarnate "I Am...the Good Shepherd, I Am the Bread of Life, I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

A beginning, an ending, an endless flow rooted in one word, unpronounceable but not entirely incomprehensible, because the Word lives for us, through us, and in us.

In other words...there are no other words. It is all God. It is all God.

And the people say...