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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, August 31, 2014

“The Hedges Are Burning”

Exodus 3:1-15

Matthew 16:21-28

There are some stories that never seem to get old, and never seem to make much more sense either, no matter how many times we tell them. The story of Moses at the burning bush is one of those.

As the passage starts, Moses has led his father-in-law’s flock out to the very edge of the wilderness, to the mountain called Horeb or Sinai. I’m not sure if Moses was looking for God there or not; what we know about Moses so far is that he knows how to survive, born at a time when the Pharaoh had commanded all male Hebrew children to be killed. Through his mother’s protection and a good bit of luck, he manages to live and grow up, raised by Pharaoh’s daughter.

And we know he has a sense of justice. He had fled Egypt after killing a man – an Egyptian – who was beating a Hebrew slave. So here he is now, in the wilderness outside Midian, where he met his wife’s family and settled down. Maybe he was looking for God, on this long route with his sheep, or maybe he’s looking for some connection to his people, or maybe he’s not quite sure what he’s looking for, but he is drawn for some reason to the mountain of God.

Whatever he was looking for, it probably wasn’t a bush on fire. In the wilderness like that, a fire could be deadly! It could spread out of control like a wildfire in California, catching on any little piece of brush, leaving a blackened path of desert behind. But *this* bush was blazing, and yet not consumed.

Moses stops in his tracks and walks *toward* this strange fire, and whether he was looking for God or not, he has stumbled onto holy ground, says God, who is the God of Moses’ people: “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” For this lost young man, cut off from his people and his traditions, God is a connection with home.

But God has not shown up just to comfort him; Moses has a job to do whether he wants it or not. God says, “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” And Moses protests, *Who am I* to go and bring the people out? Why would you send me?

It doesn’t quite make sense, then or now, unless you can see the big picture of who God is and how God works in the world. And so Moses asks *Who are you?* Who should I say is sending me?

And instead of a simple name that Moses might fit into his world, instead of the Egyptian gods who have one name like people, a noun with edges of beginning and end, God says *I am who I am*.

Two verbs and a preposition; verbs without tense exactly but just imperfect action, past/present/ future, or maybe all of the above. *I am*, God says. And what's more, God says, I am Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, the family you lost and can find again. Finally Moses gets a name he can wrap his hands around and understand! And so, after a few more objections, he finally sets off on the task God has set for him.

It's a momentous task, and one that will change the course of Israel's history, and the way we understand God's very being today.

I don't know if Moses set out looking for God, but he definitely got more than he bargained for. It seems like pointing yourself toward divine fire might be a risky proposition in that way. God has a tendency not to respect the boundaries we set for ourselves. We might think we see the edges of where God's fire is burning and where it isn't, but God has other plans.

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In our gospel text today, Peter thinks he finally has Jesus figured out! He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"! And Jesus says yes! Blessed are you, Peter.

Great, so we're set. That's who Jesus is, end of story, and we're all going to be saved now, right?

But then Jesus turns right around and starts saying he's going to have to suffer and be killed, and Peter jumps back in to say no! No, Jesus, he says, that's not how this Messiah thing works! You can't be *killed*!

And where I might want to imagine Jesus just shaking his head with an exasperated sort of sigh, instead Jesus yells right back to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" as if he is being tempted again with worldly power or tempted by the idea of being a Messiah who doesn't have to suffer. Peter wants Jesus to be something he's not; Peter wants Jesus to fit into the picture he had in mind of the God he was looking for, but whether anyone likes it or not the job of Messiah is bigger and more complicated than either of them expected.

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It sounds familiar, doesn't it? We set out looking for one thing, we think we know the rules of the game, and we're walking along a neat and ordered path with trimmed hedges just like we're used to, and then all of a sudden one of those hedges bursts into flames and sets us down a twisting

rocky path where we think God couldn't possibly be leading us. The God *we* know doesn't work that way. Right?

It happens for people and it happens for churches, especially if we've grown comfortable on the path we're used to. We get used to just living our lives, thinking we know what's right and what's wrong, knowing where God is and where God is not, set on what we do and what we don't do, calling God "God" and knowing exactly what we mean by that and what we don't mean.

And then something unexpected happens, whether it's sudden and dramatic or gradual enough we don't know things are changing until we look up to find we're not where we thought we were; and the rules of the game have changed. Suddenly the things we relied on don't seem to hold true anymore, and there's a voice asking us to do something new and we don't know if that's God's voice or not or maybe we just don't recognize it.

We are unsettled. There's a fire where there shouldn't be fire, and we want someone to come and put it out for us. We want to make sense of our lives again and put neat corners back on our hedges. We want a name to pin that experience down, so we can write it off and move on.

But that fire doesn't act like normal fire, with God's voice booming out of it, and rather than giving a simple name that has a beginning and an end, like Jonas or Maria or David or Beth, a name with shape and form and expectations attached to it – instead God is a verb. I am who I am, or maybe it's "I will be what I will be," or even "I will be what I have been." God won't quite let us pin God down. "I am," God says, and that's what we need to know.

But there's a lot there in that name, if we listen. For Moses, born to a slave and cut off from his people, God says, I am. For Peter, struggling to make sense of a Messiah who doesn't look like he expects, God says, I am. For us, uncertain of where the world is going, God says, I am. Seeing our communities change around us and clinging on to what we have known, God says, I am, I have been, I will be.

As we set off on new paths and wonder if God is still present in these new ways, God's name is in the mysterious fires: I am, I will be. I am what I am, God says, and that is eternal and both bigger than you can possibly understand and small enough to be here with you, right now, in the name and face by which your ancestors have known me.

I am God-sized and I am person-sized, I am burning and not consumed, I am Messiah and also crucified. I am who I am, God says, and that doesn't change, but don't you dare think you've seen all of me. I have plans for you that are wild and unexpected, God says, and I will be with you the whole way.

I am, God says. And that is joyful news.