

# Knowing God: I AM

February 18, 2018 ~ Exodus 3:1-14

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This week, we had another school shooting. Another senseless act of violence against innocent teenagers and their teachers. Another round of debate about gun ownership and mental illness and how we're raising men in our world.

And another round of people crying out to God. Where was God in the midst of this tragedy? This question has been asked a lot lately...

- Where was God when a car plowed into people on a London bridge?
- Where was God when a gunman opened fire at a concert? Or the other concert? Or the movie theater?
- Where was God when the hurricanes hit Florida and Texas and Puerto Rico? Where is God now when the island nation is still trying to rebuild?
- Where was God as wildfires have ravaged our western states?
- Where is God?

This is a question asked over and over again in the times we live in. I believe as we journey toward Easter together, this is a question we need to wrestle with. How we answer it will influence how we interact with the world around us.

Let us pray...

I'm reading a couple of books at the same time right now. One is the book that we are working on as our Lenten study. We are talking about The God We Can Know as we explore the I AM statements of God.

In addition, I'm reading a book called "Grounded" by Diana Butler Bass. The author is coming to our annual retreat for pastors later this month, and I wanted to read some of her work before I hear her speak. I'm only 65 pages into it, but it's a book that is speaking to this very question that we are talking about this morning. Where is God?

Beginning on page 4, Diana makes the case that history has changed the question we ask about God. Before World War 2, before the nuclear bomb, before the horrifying photos of the Nazi concentration camps, we were able to ask other questions. We asked "Why did God let this happen" or "What does God want us to do in response." But now the question has changed. We live in the Age of Anxiety or the Age of Fear, and the very question that we ask has changed to "Where is God?" This question is at its very root a deep theological question that is as relevant today as ever before. And it's what grounds us and informs us and shapes our faith.

So what's the answer? There are several possible answers.

1. One answer is that God is on his heavenly throne watching everything that's happening on earth. As he's sitting on his throne, he's a puppet master controlling everything
2. Or, God is on his heavenly throne with his robe and gavel in hand, a judge of us all waiting to throw more thunderbolts or toss us into the eternal lake of fire.
3. Or, God is just *not*. God doesn't exist, we're in this alone, nobody else is with us.

I don't know about you, but I don't like any of those choices! But there is another possibility. There's another answer to the question of "Where is God." The answer comes from our passage from Exodus this morning and our understanding of Jesus that we come to through his I AM statements and through other scripture. That answer is the claim that we make at Christmas and in the season of Epiphany afterwards: God is with us.

To find this answer, we start in our story for this morning. Here we see the Sunday School story about the burning bush and the shepherd. We see God tell Moses three things:

1. I have seen their afflictions.
2. I have heard their cries.
3. I have known their suffering.

And in return, God asks Moses to go and do for him. Go and deliver my people. Go and bring them out of slavery. Go and tell them I've seen them. Or, another translation says, "come and do." Moses makes his excuses. Five times he suggests why it should be someone else to go. Someone else to *do* for God. One of his excuses hinges around God's name. And this is where we get to the heart of our question for today. Where is God? God is with us.

Moses asks God what he should say if they ask what God's name is. And God's answer is "I AM WHO I AM." What kind of answer is that?! Yet, it's the only answer we need, even today. According to one commentary I read this week, I AM is a form of the word "to be." The promise in verse 12 is that God would be with Moses. Put them together and we understand that God is to be known as the one who is present. "(My name in its inner significance is) I am or will be (present)." Or I AM. When God says I AM, God is saying, "I am truly he who exists and who will be dynamically present then and there in the situation to which I am sending you."

Now, if you're glazing over on all this, don't fret. Let me say it this way: When God says I AM, God is saying that who God is cannot be reduced to a single word. Even if that word is a personal name, it's still not enough. God can only be grasped in and through the story that relates ALL of his words and deeds.

Or, let me explain it this way: God's name was his person, his character, his authority, his power, and his reputation. His identity is discovered in the past, where he promises blessing to the ancestors of Moses. His identity is discovered in the intention in the present, to be with Moses and to deliver his people. His identity is discovered in what he will do in the future. I AM suggests all of this, and more!

As we fast forward, we know that God did reveal so much throughout history. God was with his people through a lot of things. Ezekiel in our passage for Ash Wednesday called the people to return to God. God was always there, but their hearts of stone kept them from seeing and knowing God! Over and over, the people forgot. And so finally, we come to Christmas. We come to the foundation of our Christianity and the very foundation of our faith.

In our Christmas story, we celebrate that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means God with us. We celebrate that God has come down to the earth. God has taken on the flesh of humanity and has walked on this earth. God as human knows what it was like to live in a disappointing world...

- ... where women bleed for years and are shunned from the community;
- ... where children die and parents are beside themselves with grief;
- ... where men with mental illnesses are forced to live outside the community;
- ... where women are ridiculed for their past and left out of social circles;
- ... where disease leaves bodies weak and dying;
- ... where sisters and friends and Saviors mourn when a loved one dies;

All of these are stories from scripture! Jesus knew all about this world we live in. But even before Jesus wept, before Jesus healed, before Jesus taught, before Jesus learned in the temple, before Jesus was born in a manger, God was the same God. Who God was, before the incarnation, is who God is today. Ultimately, what we know about God is that the Bible tells us of "a God who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven on earth and occupy human hearts."

And we know this God to be a God who is present. As the world around us asks, "Where is God," we can answer, "God is with us." God is around us. God is here. But for some, that's not enough. It's not enough to say God is here, when there's such pain in our world. When there's so much going wrong, it's hard to see God.

As we journey toward Easter, I invite you to a Lenten discipline of seeking. The third book I'm reading right now is *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp. The premise is that we hunger to live life well, but often look forward to the special things or try to make special things. She asks, "How do we find joy in the midst of deadlines, debt, drama, and daily duties?" The book seeks to "wake us up" to God's everyday blessings. And while she's talking about gratitude, what she's talking about at the core is noticing God. Seeking God. This book fits so perfectly with the question of where God is. When we begin to see God's everyday blessings, we can begin to see God more often in the world around us.

So I challenge you this Lent to a discipline of seeking. Seek God in the every day. In the I AM statements that Jesus makes, he relates himself to everyday things: to bread, to light, to a vine, to a shepherd. And so I wonder if you can find God in the every day?

Let me give you some examples...

- I am reading three books right now, and anticipating two days of lectures later this month, and they are all connecting and speaking to me. God is at work!
- Ron sent me photo of a beautiful sunset over Jerome where he had dinner before camp Friday night, and God was there.
- I was feeling overwhelmed with a few building things and feeling like I was the one who knows all the pieces not just some of the pieces and I looked up and there was the chair of the trustees who said to me, "don't worry, I'll take care of it," and he did! God is here in the work of you who are church members!
- I am doing some specific work with my Spiritual Director. Last week he challenged me on one area, and I've been mulling over it. On Friday, our Admin Assistant looked me in the eye and asked me almost the same exact question my Spiritual Director asked me last week. I was floored. God is at work in my life.
- Ron was anticipating this Winter Camp this weekend and wanting to have a wintery experience for the kids coming up from the valley, which of course means snow. I don't know that Ron prayed for snow, but God provided some snow with more to come! The meadow when he got to camp Friday night was beautiful with snow so the 50 kids coming to camp could have a wintery experience. God is at work in nature!

Today, you can be assured that God is at work all around us. God is HERE all around us. I don't discount the idea that God is on a throne in heaven, but I know that there's more to God than that. Where is God? God is here. God is not dead, God is not remote, God is not an angry judge waiting to condemn us or a puppet master controlling us all. God is here, wishing to occupy our hearts. No matter what the news will bring us today, God is here. No matter what we face in our personal lives, God is here. No matter what guilt we are trying to release, God is here. No matter what we have done, God is.

God is. I AM. Emmanuel. Be assured today. And then look for God around you.

Amen and amen.