

Exodus Tales: The Divine I AM

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Rev. John G Smith at Leaside United Church

Long before time, there were oysters living and moving at the bottom of the sea. One night, there was a beautiful rich full moon, and the brilliant light of the moon penetrated deep into the dark depths.

The oysters were profoundly attracted to the mysterious glow above, and were drawn, as by a magnet, to the surface of the water and the source of the light. As they broke the surface, they were overcome by the sheer glory of the light, able to see it so much more clearly for what it was.

The oysters were so overcome with the beauty and the light, that they irresistibly opened themselves to the overwhelming presence of the light.

And, once their hard crusty outer shells were loosened up a bit, a fragment of the light was captured in the innermost self of the oyster for all eternity. As they descended back towards their lives at the sea-bottom, the oysters were changed within, something new and brilliant and reminiscent of the experience, grew within them.

Inside each of us is the truth of who we are. The "I AM" statement of our souls.

We might search endlessly for this truth, never realizing that the true beauty, lies in our innermost being. When we reflect on the stirrings we feel within our own depths, we know that we too have been touched somehow by the brilliance of a presence beyond our understanding. Perhaps for only a fleeting moment, we have sensed that we are part of something or Someone much larger than ourselves, and in responding to that knowing, the hard crusts of our selves have been opened slightly and we can sense the Other inside us, of which we are very much a part. For many of us, this happened to us when we were very young, and some of us spend the rest of our lives trying to find it again.

Now I know and you know that this story is just that: a story.

It's certainly not true, but neither is it false.

Stories resonate in our hearts precisely for this reason. Their truth is not found in the details, but rather in the telling.

My father-in-law used to tell the same stories over and over and over. Usually triggered by some funny event, John would laugh loudly as he told us once again about the night the boys tipped the neighbour's outhouse, or the day that Steve fell out of the truck. And even though we would often roll our eyes when he started the story, what John was doing was giving us our identity. The stories were his way of telling us who we were. They resonated in us.

And you know, whether they were factually true or not, misses the point. The point is, they were our stories, and they form the narrative that is our life.

The Exodus story functions in the same way. The details are not necessarily factually true. No one really believes that Moses stood on the edge of the sea and held back the waters as the people crossed. It doesn't matter. And the fact is that the Parting of the Red Sea story was told and written about 600 years later than the Bible says it happened. Clearly, the people for whom it was intended, were being reminded about their true self. They were told the stories that formed their identity, the stories that made up the narrative of their lives. I learned this from a Jewish scholarly website. Finkelstein and Silberman posit that the Exodus story is a triumphalist version (the revised standard version) of the journey out of Egypt, told at a time when the kingdom of Judah had reached its Zenith, and could finally stand up to the powerful neighbour to the West that Egypt was. It would be the last time that Judah (Israel) would ever hold such power. No wonder it has such resonance, even for Jews today.

Margaret Silf describes the story as connecting two points on a compass:

North and south,

With one point being ancient memory, and one point being future hope.

In between memory and hope, we live in a sea of change.

This rather appeals to me. The concept of living between ancient memory and distant hope suggests that the narrative of our lives is much larger and broader than we'll ever truly grasp or know. And far from belittling our lives, and the in's and out's of our daily existence, the broad form of the story provides context and deep meaning for our otherwise pretty mundane lives.

To me, this is the pure function of religion. To connect us to our story. To locate us in the context of a larger plan, a larger plot, a broader narrative. Religion comes from the word religare, which essentially means "to connect".

My goal in these next few weeks is that we somehow connect with these iconic Sunday school stories, the ones we all learned in those early days, or when we all sat down to watch Cecil B. DeMille's new movie. Those were very different days than today.

I also want to stretch our understanding beyond our Sunday school faith, and to bring us up to date theologically if that is possible. I hope to offer you a progressive way of understanding this most important stories.

In that vein, I have only a couple of short points to make today.

We know God best when the journey we take is an inner one, connected to our inner sense of the truthfulness of our lives. Catherine Keller, a current female theologian, describes it not so much as being on a journey, but rather, being On THE MYSTERY. I love that!

Consider that the our ancient ancestors tried many ways to understand the nature of God, the force behind the obvious fact that we are here and we are conscious because someone or something wanted us to be here. God was imagined in symbols, in nature, fashioned into icons or images like Ravens or Bears or Lions.

Then God became known as woman and as man. And once God was anthropomorphized, various new narratives of the history of the world came into being. Worldviews and alternative worldviews were fought literally on the battlefields of the ancient world.

Those who won, claimed their view and wrote the story.

What intrigues me most in the Moses narratives is the naming of God. YAHWEH!

Yahweh is God's name. It is a name that when spoken, wind escapes from the mouth, wind and breath being catchwords for spirit. Naming God this way reflects (for me at least) a deep inner knowing of the presence of God in the far reaches of the human heart, and the far reaches of the human psyche. We outwardly express this as we name God I AM. The great I AM, or I WILL BE, or I WAS, depending on how you might choose to conjugate the verb, is such an amorphous open-ended glorious word, it defies understanding.

For this reason, I think it is a word for today. It is neither religious, nor dogmatic. It is neither male nor female. It captures the ongoing nature of God's realm in the wind, water and chaos of our time, and it assumes that Yahweh will go before us, whether we make it or not.

In terms of our personal journeys, the name YAHWEH speaks of the ancient memory and the future hope. We find ourselves suspended between the two poles.

These two poles are COMPASS points for us. They orient us in our world.

They keep us not on a straight or narrow path, but grounded in the journeys we choose to undertake.

Like many of you this past summer, we took a vacation.

We decided to go to a place where we had never been, and to which we would likely never return. Alaska. We didn't know what we would find there. We didn't know if we would get lost, or be frozen

solid for two weeks, or whether travelling in a group of 10 (family and friends) would be the death of us all, if not at least the death of a few friendships.

But I share this because it helped me to understand my second point: another deep eternal truth:

God provides a way, always there's a way.

We provide the initiative.

I guess sometimes God provides the initiative, the divine kick-in-the-pants, but in our generation, I think it's generally the other way around. We have to WANT the journey. We have to WANT the experience. We have to WANT the transformation. There are just so many distractions that keep us from it.

I can't say yet whether our journey to Alaska was transformative though I have a hunch that it was.

What I do know is this, that it was a way INTO a time of sacred travel. It was holy time and holy place. Not just because of the scenery, or because of the travelling companions,

But just because that is how we experience the world when we pay attention to it. It was a time when the centre of gravity became central again. A time when our inner compasses could return to rest. A time of no travel, in the midst of a long journey. A time when we could hear the movement of our souls. At the end of the day, there was a sense of divine "enshrouding", or maybe divine "encampment", a sense that once we started out, we had to finish, that wherever we went and whatever we did, we were not alone. Pillars of cloud during the night, a pillar of fire during the night, so to speak.

And there was a sense of connection.

Yahweh, wind, water, spirit, brooding over the face of the earth, hovering over the chaotic sea, the One who WAS, who IS and who WILL be, SHOWED us the way.

God accompanies us, opens the way for us, holds back the "water" for us, provides a path for us, gives directions for one part of the journey at a time, goes before us, and pushes us from behind. God is invested in the human journey, God knows us, and, knowing us, still provides a vision of who we are, and what we can be.

My dream for us this fall is that we will find God in the middle of our journey, doing just what God did for Moses, leading us, inviting us, holding us when the storms rage and the seas rise, and that in finding God in the middle of our journey, we will let God find us. God will meet us there, just as God will meet us here. This is a profoundly rich statement that I hope you will take the time to savour.

And let God harvest the pearls of our inner treasure which is ours alone to reveal. Surely the time is now! This is sacred time; we are on a sacred journey.

Scientists and theologians of evolution now are beginning to agree that the evolution of humanity is likely in the stage of adolescence, if looked at with the eyes of eternity.

Technology has far outpaced the normal evolutionary process of our moral, cultural and spiritual journey as a species. The balance sheet on humanity is still not complete,

And we now realize, perhaps in only a dawning way, that who we are, what we do, and the way we live out our narrative as a species, depends very much on the individual heart and soul of each one, since ultimately we are all connected. Together we are the I AM.

The good news is that we can tell the story that will change the future: our human nature is NOT fixed in stone, but, like everything else on Earth, is part of an unfolding narrative or evolutionary process.

How we tell the old old story, and where we let it take us, will have a profound impact on the next few generations, and they will have a profound impact on the future of the Earth.

That's why the Moses narrative still holds resonance for us, though the story must be told in different terms.

God who has always been, will continue to be.

God will open the way for us, and God will meet us there!!!!