

ASKING THE BIG QUESTIONS
Exodus 3: 1-15; Matthew 16: 21-28
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by Pat Berger

High school chemistry: not a highlight of my academic career. But you know, you never know, and one thing I learned in chemistry I have carried with me ever since. Our teacher was a very faithful Lutheran. One day after we had done whatever experiment he had assigned us (so you see, it wasn't the experiment that stuck with me . . .), one of the students asked him why it had worked the way it had. The teacher looked at all of us and said, "Why is a God question." That is what I remember from high school chemistry: why is a God question, a question one needs to ask God. So the really good questions -- why earthquakes, why illness, why _____ (you fill in the blank) -- the really good questions: we need to ask God.

And that is where we find Moses today, asking God. Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep. Suddenly, beside him, a bush seemed to be burning and yet was not being consumed by the fire. I once read about this passage that there were "Six Steps to Being Called by God," and had Moses read that, too, he might at least have suspected what was happening here, but he seemed to be quite a bit unaware. First step: God appears in some fashion, as in a burning bush. Second step: God calls out to the one who is about to go to work -- "Moses! Moses! -- and tells the person the reason for his or her task. Step three is the specific assignment: "Go tell Pharaoh, let my people go!" Since God chooses people who are just plain people -- foolish, weak, not necessarily well-liked or respected -- step four is: the chosen person says some version of, I don't think so but thanks for asking. So then step five: God says, go ahead, you can do it; I will be with you wherever you go. And step six is a sign: in this case, God's chosen holy people would worship God on this mountain. The steps are here; what about Moses?

Moses is ordinary enough, and enough of a "just plain person," that he wants to chat all of this over a bit. First of course, he is a bit reluctant

to get into Pharaoh's face: who am I to challenge Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews out of Egypt? Not a problem, God replies: I will go with you -- you will be fine. Moses is a bit nervous about the reaction of his own people too: so who do I say sent me, he asks God. He wants to be able to tell them that it is the God of the Hebrews who sent him -- and he knows that to know God's name is to have some control of that God. God certainly knows this, and so the divine response: I AM WHO I AM. Or it can be translated, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. Or, again, I CREATE/CAUSE TO BE WHO/WHAT I CREATE/CAUSE TO BE. Well, what in the world does that mean? It is an answer, and it is no answer. And: that is the answer. Only those who respond to God's call will begin to know what the answer means, and at that they will only know parts of what it means. God is too large for any person to be able to fully identify. To name God is to limit God, and God cannot be limited. Why? Oh, right: that is a God question.

It sounds to me as if The God Question, the "why," is what Peter is dealing with in our reading from Matthew. He didn't put it in the form of a question, but surely that is there. Last week, we overheard as Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Messiah," and as a result of that, Jesus telling Peter that he would build the church on him and would give him the keys of the kingdom. It might be a natural thing, then, for Peter to think that he had the right -- even duty -- when Jesus told of his impending suffering and death to be the one who would say, "God forbid it, Lord!" Unfortunately, he had guessed incorrectly again; he had been too human again. The way that Jesus' response is written -- "Get behind me, Satan!" -- sidetracks us; it is easy for us to think that Jesus is calling Peter "Satan", when his intention most likely is rather that Peter remember that the place of a disciple is behind the leader, and that leader in this case would like for Satan or temptation to get behind him. A disciple ought not be dictating action; a disciple needs to say something along the line of, "OK; so: how can we be helpful?"

And Jesus' disciples now? What is the big question for us to ask, today, until it is our turn to get to ask the "why" question? Perhaps we, each one of us, might start with: where is God calling me? What task would God have me working at, right now? Remember, we talked last week

about how the mission doesn't have to be something grand or showy; the small, all but invisible things are every bit as important to the growth of the kingdom. We want to be faithful, to do things that matter. We have been reading about the fires in Maui and what Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is doing there. This week, Hurricane Idalia impacted lives in seven different presbyteries, and PDA is at work in all of those. The church has also reached out to Cuba and Mexico, to see how we can be helpful. Closer to home, there was a fire at the Catholic church in Salem a couple of days ago, and the first news report that I heard said that a group of people from the Presbyterian church that is its neighbor were over there right away, asking how they could be helpful. Then I saw in the Oregonian that Pastor Greg Bolt from Salem First had got over there straight away and offered worship space to them, and said that they were good with casseroles! The priest has only been at the church for two months -- a whole new set of challenges. And it will be some of the small things that his people and others do that will make big differences.

God works for us and through us to accomplish the kingdom. What will it be that you do this week that will be a part of that? For now, that may be the big question.

Let us pray.

O God, you have called your 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 only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.