

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 28, 2025

Hello, my name is *I am* ...

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 28, 2025

God breathes creation into existence and, thank God, just cannot leave it alone. Throughout history, God enters human affairs, but never the same way twice.

Each of our ancient ancestors encounters God in a way that saves them and corrects humanity's trajectory. And, each time God gives us another glimpse of the depth of God's love.

Adam finds God strolling through the garden as casually as the neighbor walking the dog. From the beginning God is that intimate.

When God sees Hagar and her son, Ishmael, facing certain death in the desert, God rescues both of them. Hagar is the first person to give God a name. She calls God "the God who sees me".

Three strangers materialize before Abraham and Sarah's tent at dinnertime. One stranger, who is unmistakably God, causes Sarah to laugh at the absurdity of her old body conceiving a son after so many decades of disappointment. The son she bears is named "Isaac", which means laughter. Imagine that! Who gets the last laugh?

God personally wills the blessing of future generations by preserving Isaac's life in the many instances he faces death.

In the next generation, God out-wrestles Isaac's son, Jacob, one lonely desert night. Just before dawn God blesses him and changes his name to Israel, from whom the twelve tribes descend.

Each encounter reveals more of who God is and who God intends for us to be.

As we move from the Book of Genesis to Exodus, the sons of Israel swell to multitudes and the story expands with a world-wide perspective. The tone of our story evolves to more of a folklore with Pharaoh, who has enslaved the Israelites, personifying evil in a battle between good and evil. God seeks creation's goodness, so God directs the birth of Moses to topple the evil ruler.

Since Pharaoh decreed the death of all infant boys, Moses is set afloat in a small boat – literally called an “ark” like Noah's ark – down the Nile River. None other than Pharaoh's daughter rescues Moses and raises him in the Egyptian palace.

As an adult, no amount of royal pedigree keeps Moses from being moved by compassion when he sees the inhumane treatment of the enslaved Hebrew people. In a fit of rage, Moses takes the life of an Egyptian guard and then flees for his own safety. While hiding, he becomes a common shepherd.

God meets Moses while he tends his sheep.

*Dear God,
You reveal your holiness in bits and pieces,
in places and moments, we would never have guessed.
Silence the noise around and
startle us with your grace
so that we not only see but grasp
what you are calling us to become
in this time and place. Amen.*

Exodus 2:23-25, 3:1-15

²³The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help rose up to God from their slavery. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and

came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."

⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

⁵Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

⁶God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up

out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹² God said, “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you *that it is I who sent you*: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

¹³ But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” God said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

Is it just me, or does it feel like we’re caught in a perilous trajectory beyond anyone’s capacity to change? Even though the tragedies change from day to day, we seem to hear the same angry arguments of who is at fault.

We’ve absorbed these labels that define who belongs, who matters, who deserves joy, rest, safety, abundance. These labels become embedded and perpetuate cycles—passed down, reinforced by notions of scarcity by those seeking to control.

And these labels drown out the good story of God that teaches us who we are and what we can become.

This somewhat describes how Moses might have felt...who was stuck in a wilderness, fearful of his future, not sure if God

knows him or cares about him, who could not imagine how to break free of being bound, and into this wilderness God speaks.

Leave it to God to take a name that is not a noun or even an adjective. Leave it to God to twist our imaginations with the verb “to be.” Grammar geeks know the irregular verb “to be” is the most complicated of all the English verbs—and most used. The “to be” verbs are; am, are, is, was, and were, along with the present participle “being,” and the past participle “been.”

God’s reply to Moses can be translated:

“I AM WHO I AM,”

or

I will be who I will be

or

I will cause to be what I will cause to be.

This story takes us to examine the fundamental question of God’s existence and our place in God’s world.

The great twentieth-century theologian, Paul Tillich, urges caution when we talk about God.

Part of the problem, Tillich wrote, was that we talk about God in the same terms we use for ourselves, or a tree or a house. We use terms that describe things with a finite existence, because that is all we know. Tillich claims, God doesn't exist in a technical sense. God is not a Being. God is. God is not part of reality. God is the ultimate reality.

Tillich's book, *The Courage to Be*, became a classic in which he describes God as "The Ground of All Being" from which God gives humanity *the courage to be*. Who or what we comprehend God to be directly impacts who we believe we can become. From God flows our likeness, given at the creation of humanity, and, with God's help, can become the force of good as God desires.

To talk about God means talking about something absolute, unlike anything else; something beyond the limits of human comprehension and therefore beyond human language. God is the very essence of existence. This is heady stuff and yet foundational to our lives, just like breathing.

Even though God became intimate to Moses' faith ancestors – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – in unique and life-saving ways, God remains a mystery.

God understands our desire to name something comes from our desire for certainty and that becomes the slippery slope to believing we own or control things. Or that we need to protect God.

A lot of evil—within households, communities, nations and across the world – is caused by people, religious people, possessing absolute certainty about God and God's nature and God's will.¹

Absolute certainty about being right about God or knowing the mind of God leads people to use faith, and scripture, and even God as a weapon. Perhaps you've witnessed someone

¹ I am forever indebted to the Reverend Dr. John M. Buchanan of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago for the ways his sermons and mentoring helped me finally accept God's call to become a minister. Twenty-five years later, this sermon still influences my thinking and humble reverence for scripture. "Does God Exist?", Fourth Presbyterian Church, September 12, 1999, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1999/091299.html>. John also inspired me to attend the University of Chicago where he studied.

hurling a portion of sacred text against another person to silence them or even worse, to incite fear and hatred.

Nothing could grieve God's heart more than the way we use the divine source of creation's goodness and our final destiny to harm God's own creation.

We know this God's heart grieve because God enters into our lives as Jesus to be God among us. In each gospel, Jesus confronts those who choke the life out of God's creation by the ways they twisted sacred texts to deny the humanity of another and to prop up their own quests for power.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus introduces himself with a mind-twisting mystery to echo that burning bush.

Jesus encounters a woman at a well, who was ostracized for her gender, nationality, and sinful past. All of these conditions were considered unforgiveable by the values of the times and yet he offers her living water.

That sparks her imagination. She confides that she too awaits God's long promised messiah.

Jesus says, “I am he.” Thus begins the long line of “I am” statements in John: “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

No one statement conveys the breadth of his grace or the intimacy he occupies in our lives.

If we ever wonder where salvation begins or who comes closer to the divine, our faith story tells us to listen to the outsider who in moments of vulnerability more clearly greets God among us.

Let’s go back to Moses at the burning bush.

Moses heard God’s name and God’s very clear command to liberate the Israelites from Pharoah. How could he return to Egypt and face not only punishment for his crime but also risk enslavement?

Moses may have imagined God saying, “I am the one who causes things to pass.” God gave Moses the courage to let go of any doubts that he could be an agent to stop the spiraling evil.

At first Moses refused, but God will not accept “no” for an answer. Nor will God abandon him. This story of deliverance begins with Moses, includes his brother Aaron. And, as God works through them, they inspire the Israelites to pursue the freedom to be what God desires.

I think Cecil B. DeMille did us a disservice by casting Charlton Heston as Moses in the now-classic film, *The Ten Commandments*. (Our AV Technicians are all film students and all of them know of this classic, but none have seen it. We googled and learned that it was filmed in 1955.) Perhaps Moses might not seem so beyond us if played by Woody Allen or Pee Wee Herman.

Regardless of how heroic Moses becomes, the story refers to Moses as merely, “the man Moses.” Such simplicity signifies his status as any ordinary human who endures soul-trying tasks, is reluctantly called to leadership, and who displays both the moral and all-too-human weaknesses we all possess.²

² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 1 The Five Books of Moses*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), P 206. I am indebted to Alter’s overall guidance in the history of our sacred scriptures, nuances among the various books, and the commentary on the Hebrew texts. What joy is found in reading scripture with his reverence and scholarship.

This story invites us to consider how would we finish God's "I am" name in our lives. You see, the story includes us with the undebatable words from God "this is my name for all generations."

What doubts do we need to shed to become what God is calling us to become? What does God's name need to be for you?

Let me offer a few ideas. If you do not have a burning bush, maybe God speaks to you from running water, a breeze, your dog...you know what captures your attention best.

God speaks to you and says...

"Hello, I am the confidence to walk in to stand up to the bully? Trust me, you won't be alone. Many others will join you."

Or, perhaps God will introduce the ultimate divine reality as:

"Hello, I am the one who made you to beloved inside and out, regardless of what others say? I love every hair on your head and desire in your heart."

Or, God might speak with the clarity with which God has spoken throughout the ages:

“Hello, I am the one who needs you to shelter the aliens in your land. Your ancestors were often without a home and in need.”

God calling us to work with others to free those who are oppressed, enslaved, frightened, or threatened.

God speaks. Trust your imagination. That too is God-given.



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