

# Here I am

Hespeler, September 3, 2023 © Scott McAndless – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

[Exodus 3:1-15](#), Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Earlier this year, I did [a sermon on the story of the binding of Isaac](#) – the story of the time when Abraham was apparently ordered by God to sacrifice his son. Something struck me in particular in that story. Every time Abraham is addressed in it – by God, by Isaac and by the angel of the LORD – he responds in exactly the same way.

## How we Respond

Abraham doesn't answer like you or I would. If someone calls your name, how do you respond? "Scott," or "Dad" I hear someone call out in my house, what do I say?

"What do you want?" I might say, assuming, of course, that the person calling me has some request of me or something they want me to do.

Or I might respond with, "I'm down in the basement," or something like that if my assumption is that they are looking to come to where I am.

Or, and doesn't this happen a whole lot in life these days, if I am right in the middle of something when somebody calls, I might respond, "I'm practicing my sermon," or whatever else it is that I might be doing. This can be said, of course, with varying degrees of frustration or annoyance – never by me, of course, but I understand that there are people in the world who can get annoyed by interruptions.

## Assumptions Behind How we Respond

So, to sum up how we respond, we tend to respond with an assumption that the person calling us wants something from us – either something we've got or something that we can do for them.

And we do all of that, mind you, without even thinking about it. It just comes naturally, probably because we assume that everything in life is about what you have got or what you can do that offers value or significance.

This is actually the central assumption of most capitalist societies – that work and possessions are the only things that give value to life. Because we live in such a society, we generally assume that that is how things have always been and how everyone else has always thought.

## Abraham's Response

So that is why it really struck me how Abraham responded when God or others called him. He didn't say, "What do you want," or "I'm in the tent," or "I'm washing the camel." He responded, we are told, by saying, **"Here I am."**

Now, presumably, he responded that way because it was a Hebrew idiom – a common phrase used by many people. But that fact alone tells us a great deal about the people who spoke ancient Hebrew – that they weren't necessarily task or possession oriented like we are and that they responded to people differently than we do. That might mean that they could have something to teach us about responding differently.



## What he Actually Says

So, I decided to look a little closer at what Abraham actually says. His response, in Hebrew is actually just one word. When God calls he says, “hin·nê·nî” (הִנְנִי). And, while the best English translation is indeed, “Here I am,” the Hebrew phrase doesn’t mean exactly that.

For one thing, there is no verb in it. The word that Abraham uses is actually just a very common Hebrew word that is used to indicate things. It was the word you used, for example, when you pointed at something. Someone would ask you, “Hey, where is the TV remote?” and you point and say, “hin·nêh.” (הִנֵּה)

## Behold!

In the old King James Version, this Hebrew word was most often translated as “behold.” And one thing you notice very quickly when you read the King James Bible is that there are a lot of “beholds!” People said this all the time in Hebrew.

Of course, nobody ever says “behold” in English anymore so modern translations tend to use words like “look” or “see.” But the Hebrew word doesn’t really have anything to do with vision, it was just a way of indicating something – the spoken equivalent of pointing.

So, what does Abraham say whenever anyone calls him in that story? He points at himself and says, “Here me.” He says, “voila!” or maybe, “Ta da!” And I just want you all to understand how different that is from how we generally respond to somebody calling us.

## Also in this Story

That same word, “hin·nê·nî,” appears in our reading from the Book of Exodus this morning. And this is a really important story because it is the story of what is probably the most important experience anyone has ever had of the presence of God.

In this story, God appears to Moses in a burning bush. And remember where Moses is at this point of his story. Despite growing up as a prince in Egypt, he has come to recognize that something is very wrong with the way things are in Egypt. Though he has apparently benefited from slavery all of his life, Moses has come to recognize the evil in it. As you can imagine, this creates a bit of a moral crisis for him.

## Previous Failures

And we are told that Moses did try to do something about what he saw was wrong with the world. When he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, he intervened and ended up killing the Egyptian. This, let me be clear, was not a good plan. It clearly took a bad situation and made it so much worse. And Moses ended up running away from the consequences of his actions.

And, at this point, Moses seems to have kind of given up. He recognizes that the world is not right, but he’s withdrawn into the desert because he’s lost any hope that things might get better. I think a lot of us can sympathize with where Moses is at this point in the story.

## An Epiphany

And, if Moses is going find the hope of a better world and he’s given up on making it happen himself, he is left with but one option. He needs to find God. And God does appear to Moses; that is the good news of this story. But God also appears, somewhat famously, in a strange kind of epiphany. God appears in a bush that is on fire.

## A Timely Appearance

And oh, is there any other way that we could speak of God appearing that would be timelier than that right now? Haven't we been talking about a whole lot of burning bushes and trees recently? We have just gone through a spring, summer and the beginning of a fall where we have seen so many out of control fires. This summer saw a record number of wildfires spread all the way through British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes.

And, for the first time that many of us can remember, these weren't just fires that were way off in distant forests, but we all experienced the effects of them firsthand as the smoke enveloped our cities and made it dangerous for some people to breathe outdoors.

And, of course, it has not just been about Canada this year, as distressing as that has been. We have also seen how places all over the earth, including Greece and Hawaii have been devastated by such fires.

## Can God Speak through Burning Trees?

And so, it seems to be a perfect time to ask the question if God can speak through burning trees. I personally think that God can. I think there is a powerful message in all of these burning trees – a message about our need to change how we live in relationship to this fragile earth.

But maybe I'm wrong, because there seem to be a lot of people who don't hear any such message or, if they hear it, are much more concerned with what they call important things like keeping the economy humming along and allowing the rich to get richer. So, if God can and does speak through burning trees, how is it that so many don't seem to find God or hear God's voice today?

## How did Moses Realize God was in it?

That's the question I have to ask of Moses today. He saw a bush that was burning. And bushes have been burning forever. I mean, yes, it seems as if we are bound to break a record on wildfires this year, but I suspect that God has been present in and speaking in them a long time. So, how is it that Moses recognized God's presence in that bush when a lot of other people could have gone by that bush and seen it and yet never suspected that God might be in that thing?

That is where I think that an understanding of how Moses replied when God called is so important. When God called, Moses replied, "hin·nê·nî." He said, "Here I am! Voila! Ta Dah!!" In that moment, Moses simply proclaimed himself to be present. He didn't reply like we tend to these days. He didn't say, "I'm busy with the sheep," or "I'm worried about the slaves back in Egypt," or even, "What do you want?" He just said "hin·nê·nî."

## Why don't we Experience God?

And it makes me wonder, is that the reason why we don't have such experiences of God? It is not that God is absent or doesn't appear. It is just that we are just so busy at being busy and concerned with what people are expecting from us that we can't just stop and be present to God in the moment.

So, yes, maybe we do need to learn something from the Ancient Hebrews about how we respond to God in this world. The very fact that we are so task oriented and materialistic may just be the thing that is preventing us from experiencing the very real presence of God that I do believe is active in this world. Maybe we need to develop the mindfulness and the self-awareness to say, "hin·nê·nî." Here I am.

## Something Unique about the Bush

There is one other thing that I haven't mentioned yet that might also have allowed Moses to have that experience. We are told that he turned aside to see a burning bush, but it was not just any burning bush. There was something that he noticed that was very unique about it. **"The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed."**

And I am not quite sure how you would even notice that peculiar fact about a burning bush. Anytime I have ever looked at something that was on fire – not to mention something as dramatic as a wildfire in the wilderness – the thing that usually strikes me is the power of it, the heat and the smoke.

## Paying Attention

I do not generally pay attention to how quickly the fire is consuming whatever is fueling it. It seems to me that that is something that you'd have to specifically pay attention to and watch for over a period of time.

So, it seems to me that another reason why Moses was able to have such an experience of God is that he was paying attention to things that we tend not to. We seem to have been trained to pay attention to the noisy things, whatever causes harm and destruction.

## Why we Pay Attention to the Wrong Things

This is, by the way, exactly what most social media has been training us to do for some time now. The algorithms that control the content on Facebook, Twitter (or whatever it is called) and other sites are all tuned to present to you whatever stories are likely to get you upset and angry because that is what drives engagement.

But Moses has already tried anger and fiery deeds when faced with injustice in Egypt and look how that turned out. He seems to be ready for something different. And so, he pays attention to something else. He pays attention to what, in the midst of all the fire and destruction, is miraculously able to survive.

## The Possibility of Hope

In the context of the situation in Egypt, on which he had given up, that means that he is suddenly made aware that despite the fiery trial of slavery that his people are suffering from in Egypt, they have somehow survived, perhaps even thrived to a certain extent. He is suddenly confronted with the possibility of hope.

And I think that that is the other thing that allows Moses to experience God by that bush. He is suddenly open to finding hope even in the direst of situations.

This also might be the thing that sometimes prevents us from experiencing God in this world. If all we can see are the flames, if all we can see are all the things that cause us to give up hope, I suspect that the experience of God will continue to elude us. But once we open ourselves, even just a little bit, to the possibility of hope, I believe the presence of God can shine through.

God is alive. God is here. God is acting in this world for hope and looking for you to work alongside. The only question, really is where are you, and will you say, "Here I am."