

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh
Sunday, November 20, 2022, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Hear the Gospel according to Langston Hughes ... and Shea Diamond

I, too, sing America

*I am the darker brother
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.*

*Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed –*

*I, too, am America
 Baby, I am America
 I'm a stranger just like you*

*Baby, I am America
 You been begging for the truth*

*Baby, I am America
 And I'm burning through the roof*

*Baby, I am America
 And I'm here to change the news.*

*Baby I am America
 Let me make it crystal clear
 We're here.*

*This how America walk
This how America talk
This how America is*

*Baby, I am America
I'm your cherry pie on your lips
Baby, I am America
I'm your gin and juice, take a sip
I know I get you excited
My existence is a riot
So don't you dare even try it*

*Baby, I am America
Let me make it crystal clear.
We're here*

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Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

Repeat that after me

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

One more time

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

(I'll tell you what you said in a minute)

So Moses ... standing in the desert ... minding his own business ... or, rather, minding his father-in-law's business ... when God's voice comes out of a burning bush and says:

Moses - I got a job for you. Deliver my people out of slavery.

And Moses has gotta be thinking, "Why did I get out of bed this morning?"

Because, immediately he is playing scenarios out in his mind and none of them end well ... and they all start with the looks he just knows people are going to give him if he shows up saying that God talked to him out of a bush.

And so, Moses raises his hand and says, “Uh ... 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 God’s name?’ What shall I say to them?”

I’m not sure why that was the first question that came to Moses’s mind but it was.

And I’m not sure what Moses was expecting God to say and how he thought that was going to help but that was the question he asked.

I mean, what if God had said: “Gloria Groove?” Tell them “Gloria Groove” sent you.

I’m not sure that would have strengthened Moses’ hand there ... but it would have made for an interesting if fleeting historical moment.

But that’s the question Moses asks, “If they ask me ‘What is God’s name?’ What shall I say to them?”

And God says:

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So, what does that mean?

Well, the most common translation is “I am who I am” ... which I’ve never really found helpful. It sounds kind of like the “because I said so” your mother says when you question the necessity of picking up your socks.

Who am I? “I am who I am” ... now get your behind into that room and start cleaning.

But the translation is far more wonderfully enigmatic than that.

Here’s what Rabbi Peter Knobel writes:

“Volumes have been written in response to this question. I believe God said something like the following, ‘I am whatever you want Me to be. I am whatever you need Me to be. You cannot know My Essence but we will have a relationship, and you will tell stories about your encounters with Me. None of them will be totally accurate because I am not a concept. I am a living complex reality that can be experienced, but not defined or limited by language. That is Who I am and Who I Will Be.’”

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The name of God is important not just because we need to know what to call her but because it tells us not just about God's identity but our own. Because in the very beginning of our sacred story we are told that we are created in *B'tzelem Elohim* ... in the image of God.

That means each one of us ... is a living complex reality that can be experienced, but not defined or limited by language.

That is a profound theological statement ... that because we are created in the image of God ... none of us can be defined by another. That is a PROFOUND theological statement ... It is wonderful, it is liberating and it is also

Scary
As
Hell

Because if there are two things we humans have struggled with from the beginning of our time on this planet it is:

- *Being fully who we are
- *Letting other people be fully who they are

We live in these boxes.

We put ourselves in them and we put each other in them.

We do it out of fear that we are not good enough, that we are not lovable enough or maybe even good or lovable at all.

This base insecurity leads us to seek validation through domination ... and so from the very beginning whoever is in power has enshrined aspects of their being as normative and made others conform if they are to be accepted ... or even survive.

And I do mean survive. At least five dead and 22 injured when someone walks into an LGBTQ+ nightclub in Colorado Springs that is supposed to be a safe space in a hostile world ... and starts shooting last night.

I do mean survive. Recent studies have shown a link to people who regularly have to deal with being targeted by structural racism and markedly higher rates of hypertension and heart disease.

And it is about insecurity.

Because if I am absolutely OK with who I am then I don't need you to be like me.

If I am absolutely OK with who I am, I can not only let you be who you are ... I can celebrate who you are and help liberate you from anything or anyone who is keeping you from being who you are!

And really, if I had to sum up Jesus in maybe one sentence or two ... that would be it!

Jesus -- the incarnation of the *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* -- that's all he did. Jesus just fully was who he was, invited everyone he met to fully be who they were and stood against any system that tried to do any different.

Now you would think this would be a good thing. You would think this would be well received.

But of course, we know better.

We know that we have spent so long and invested so much in these systems that oppress and control, systems that depend on some being on top and some being on the bottom ... and not in the fun way ... and it has become so ingrained in us that this is the way it has to be

And if we are in the in group ... the one that gets to define normality and make the rules .. then we better defend that reality and those rules so we stay there.

And if we're in the out groups we had better embrace that reality or follow those rules or we will pay the price.

I mean look at what Jesus did and what happened to him.

We say at All Saints Church "We walk with a revolutionary Jesus" ... and we do because Jesus was and is a revolutionary.

Jesus didn't raise an army.

Jesus didn't mount an insurrection.

Jesus just laid out a table and said,

"Y'all come.

"Come as you are and as you are becoming.

"And nobody gets to tell anyone else they can't be there, nobody gets to tell anybody else who or how they have to be.

“and everyone gets to see themselves in what happens at this table.”

Fredrika Newton is sitting right here, and Fredrika, you said something amazing in the forum, you said “the smallest thing can be a revolutionary act.”

Making room at the table for one more person is a revolutionary act.

Looking in someone’s eyes and really trying to see who they are is a revolutionary act.

Joy is a revolutionary act when we take it in ourselves and in each other.

Jesus would have been dancing at Club Q in Colorado Springs last night.

Maybe he was.

And maybe he didn’t make it out alive.

What was revolutionary about Jesus was that he didn’t buy into systems of supremacy ... and by supremacy, I mean any system that says you have to be or act or believe a certain way not just to thrive but even to survive.

I want to be clear about this, because we use these words a lot.

When we talk about dismantling White Supremacy or patriarchy or cisheteronormativity – and we’re going to keep talking about that because we’ve got so much work to do and it is about our liberation ... but when we talk about that, it is not saying that I as a white person or man or cisgender straight dude am bad ... it is saying that that any of these as concepts that believes it is superior and sets norms and makes laws to enforce conformity to it has got to go because it imprisons all of us. Because it is not worthy of a God who dwells in us as *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

That’s what was revolutionary about Jesus and that’s the revolution we walk together. And like any revolution, the world does not embrace this one, either. Huey Newton wrote, “the first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that they are a doomed person. Unless they understand this, they do not grasp the essential meaning of their life.” (I fixed the pronouns a little there, Fredrika, I hope that’s OK.)

Jesus knew this ... and that is why he was arrested, tortured and executed by the state.

And even when he is dying on a cross the powers cannot stop defining him by their terms. Hanging a sign over his head even in mockery trying to define him by their terms:

“King of the Jews.”

Even when he is dying on a cross one of the people dying next to him cannot stop defining Jesus in the way that suits him. Trying to get him to be some code-switching Messiah who can fit his expectations and serve his needs.

Hey, I know you're suffering and dying ... but could you save me?

Only the person hanging on the other side of Jesus begins to get it. He says, "this man has done nothing wrong" ... and then he says something incredibly profound. He says in the Greek, "Jesus, μνήσθητί μου" ... "Jesus, remember me."

Now that Greek word for remember is not just "oh yeah, hey, I know that dude."

It is active.

It is engaged.

That word remember means you have experienced who someone truly is and have taken them into your heart and are bringing them back into the present.

He sees Jesus for who Jesus is ... and then asks Jesus to see him for who he is.

It is the nod in passing on the street that Amy Hunter talked about here several years ago in her forum, "Things White People Don't Know" ... the nod that those among us who are black share that silently in a world that sanctions them severely for being who they are says:

I see you.

I see you.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

Somehow, we can't seem to stop trying to control and define each other.

Somehow we can't seem to stop being afraid of letting others just be who they are.

Somehow we can't seem to stop being ashamed of who we are.

And it is nothing new.

It's older than Jesus.

It's even older than Moses.

Our very creation stories are full of it.

The first thing we learn in the stories of creation is that it can't just be about us.

That it is not good for us to be alone.

We need each other.

It is that South African philosophy of *ubuntu*, of I can only be because you are.

And then, when God creates the earth creature, Adam and then creates woman out of Adam ... right away, the man centers himself.

Right away, he says is “this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.”

He does not see Eve as autonomous but only in relationship to him. The first thing he does is not see her for who she is but define her of being of him.

Of Adam, Margaret Atwood would say.

And then when they receive knowledge and are like the God who is *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* ... they can't handle the truth.

Their reaction in seeing themselves and each other is shame and hiding.

And that's the cycle that imprisons us all.

We externalize oppression to define others.

We internalize oppression to suppress ourselves.

And when our participation in it is brought to our attention we react in fear and shame ... which only serves to reinforce the very systems that enslave us all.

You see, Pharaoh never went away, he alive and well. He just changed his avatar and paid \$8 for a blue checkmark.

Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name.

And the way to stand against Pharaoh.

The way to soften Pharaoh's heart.

The way to not just liberate the enslaved but overthrow the whole system.

It is that little individual act of revolution.

It starts with saying three little words.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

That is the revolution.

That is the dream.

That is the joy.

Everyone being who they are and who they are becoming.

And that's why things like what languages we hear in this space

... and what faces are on the stained glass windows

... and who is preaching and presiding

... and what music we sing and hear

... and whose cultural norms we use to function

... and the unspoken yet powerful expectations of dress and hairstyle and self-expression are so important.

Not because any of the dominant ones in this space by nature are bad but because having any of them be dominant creates a poverty for all of us.

And the long, long, long history and present reality of dominance of, frankly, whatever kind of looks, talks and dresses and quacks like me has not only real economic and health consequences if you don't fit the mold

...or from even having to try every day to fit the mold

... but even more it is soul killing for all of us.

It is soul killing to not be able to be who God is creating you to be.

And it is soul killing to be a part of doing that to someone else.

We know this. Of course, we do.

We know this because we have lived this at All Saints Church.

We know this All Saints Church because long before I got here, you all have been standing before Pharaoh for a long time with those three words on our lips. Fighting for the rights of human beings to be who we are,

It would be offensive to us – it has been offensive to us, it has been deeply traumatic to us when people say things like

...."marriage can only be between a man and a woman."

Or "you're in America ... speak English."

Or "it's OK for men to control women's and trans people's bodies."

And we have stood proudly in this church and said those theologies and practices have no place here, and we will not have God's children denigrated in those ways.

And many of you sitting here have worked and are working tirelessly and bear the scars of that revolutionary walk with Jesus, and thank you for that.

We are not new to this walk.

We are not new to this work.

And there is still work to do.

And we are doing it and we will continue to do it.

And everyone has a role in that.

It is the work of ending conformity as a prerequisite for community.

Of ending uniformity as a prerequisite for unity.

Removing the gag from every mouth so each and all of us can sing

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

I began this sermon with a mashup of sorts. Two anthems of the resilience of the human spirit written nearly a century apart.

Langston Hughes' poem, "I Too," was part of a collection called *The Weary Blues* ... and that is a part of this journey. For there is a weariness to having to fight the same fight and have the same conversations and live with double consciousness and code-switching not to mention fearing for life itself.

If you are coming into this space and you are queer ... or have queer family members or friends ... I do not know the weariness that you are feeling this morning, but I know that you are feeling it.

And please know that this is a place where you can bring that weariness and that we will try to be weary together.

And then, Shea Diamond wrote “I Am America” not only as a theme for the HBO Show *We’re Here* – which if you haven’t checked it out, you gotta check it out --- it is where three drag queens spread love and connection across small-town America. And she didn’t write it for that but as a power anthem for all those, who like her as a black trans woman, have found joy and freedom in being who God has created and is still creating them to be.

It is one of the great gifts of those among us who are trans – the courageous joy with which in the face of great danger trans people are standing up again and again and not just shouting I am what I am, but I am what I am becoming.

I Too and I Am America - together they are the defiant pain and the amazing joy of the life we share.

Together they are the pain and joy of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

OK, I’m going to bring this in for a landing.

This is our Presentation Sunday ... and that means in a few minutes we will invite everyone to come toward the front and lay the gift of your pledge or other offering on this table ... this table that Jesus has been laying for more than two thousand years not just for some people but for everyone.

We always say everyone is welcome to come to the table but you never really quite get there... we always kinda stop you right here. Well this time – and we’re going to help you if we need to – come up and put something on that table or maybe just a gesture of yourself.

And what I invite us to do is whatever is written on that piece of paper ... or even if we don’t have a piece of paper to lay on that table ... to come forward and to recognize and celebrate that the greatest offering, the greatest presentation, the greatest gift we can give to God and to each other is the gift of being unashamedly who we are and the gift of together creating a community where everyone can see themselves and be seen.

The greatest gift, the greatest presentation is saying together in front of God and everyone:

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

Because as polarized and oppressive as it is out there ... we are walking with the revolutionary Jesus and the world we're trying to build out there we've gotta build it in here, too.

And everyone gets to be a part of it.

And everyone needs to see themselves in it or we're not doing it right.

We are America.

And everyone is at this table when company comes

And anyone who dares say that only one hue or gender or orientation or expression of humanity is acceptable well, they will see how beautiful we are and be ashamed. And then we will invite them to join this ever-expanding table of love.

We are America
A stranger just like you
Been begging for the truth
We're burning through the roof
And we're here to change the news.

Baby we are America
And let us make it crystal clear
We're here.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh
Alleluia
Amen