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"I Am Who Am"

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"I Am Who Am"

Praying with Icons the Third Sunday of Lent



Prophet Moses Before the
Burning Bush
13th Century
St. Catherine's Monastery,
Mt. Sinai

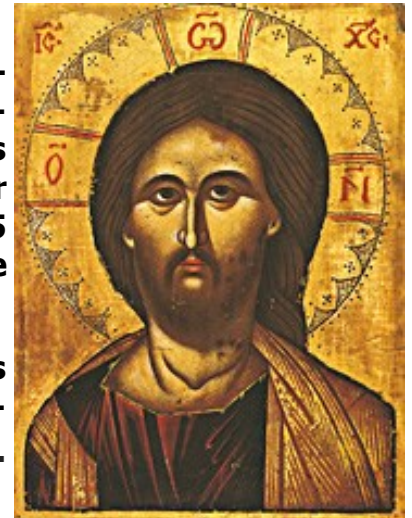
Moses and the burning bush may be one of the most memorable images from the Hebrew Scriptures. It is this encounter between Moses and God that is central to our First Reading (Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15) this Third Sunday of Lent in Lectionary Cycle C. (If you are celebrating the RCIA scrutinies, you may hear the Cycle A readings proclaimed at Mass the Third Sunday of Lent.)

Not only does Moses receive his mission from God, as God calls him to lead God's people out of Egypt, but God reveals God's name to Moses! When Moses asks God how he should respond to potential inquiries from the Israelites as to what is God's name, God replies, "I am who am" (Exodus 3:14). At the end of our Scripture passage, God adds that this is God's name forever and how God is to be remembered through all generations (Exodus 3:15).

Did you know we have a very visible reminder of God's name when we gaze upon a Byzantine or Orthodox icon of Jesus Christ? The word "icon" means "image" or "likeness" or "portrait." Jesus is the icon, or image, of God. Colossians 1:15 tells us that *Jesus is the image of the invisible God*. Christ is the perfect image, or icon, of the invisible God.

Look closely at most Byzantine and Orthodox icons of Jesus Christ. Do you see the Greek letters in Christ's halo? These letters, $\omega\eta$ (omicron, omega, nu), translate "I Am." God is one. Jesus Christ is the same "I Am" who spoke to Moses in the burning bush.

If you want to meditate upon this even further, read John's Gospel and note the descriptive titles by which Jesus refers to himself: John 6:35 "I am the bread of life..." ; John 8:12 "I am the light of the world..." ; John 10:7 "...I am the gate



Christ (Cretan, circa 1600)
Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

for the sheep”; John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd”; John 11:25 “...I am the resurrection and the life”; John 14:6 “...I am the way and the truth and the life”; and, John 15:5 “I am the vine...” Jesus is telling us who he is!



Good Shepherd (Mosaic); Ravenna, 5th century
Galla Placidia Mausoleum, Ravenna, Italy



The Burning Bush
Iconographer:
Damaskinos, Michael
16th century
Location:
St. Catherine's Monastery,
Mt. Sinai

Let's return for a moment to our starting point – Moses and the burning bush. The bush was on fire, and we know what happens when a bush or tree is consumed by fire. Yet this burning bush was not physically altered in any way even though it was on fire. We have talked about the everlasting name of God, but this image also gives us a theologically rich title for Mary, the Mother of God: “Burning Bush.” Just as the burning bush was not physically altered from the flames, neither was Mary physically altered in giving birth to Jesus. Even though she gave birth to the Son of God, Mary remained ever-Virgin.

So spend some time this third Sunday of Lent praying with icons – those beautiful windows into heaven – as you ponder God's name, the call of Moses, the “I Am” titles of Christ, and Mary as “Burning Bush.” It is a very rich First Reading as we encounter the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and know that just as God called Moses by name, so, too does God call us by name this day.

What is God's mission for each of us?