

When I sink into my work as a chaplain, I find myself asking the same questions that Moses asked when, in the very beginning of Shemot, of the book of Exodus, he first stood on the holy ground in direct encounter with God. Moses asks God, "Who am I? *Mi Anochi?*" When I sit with a person seeking my care as their chaplain, I also often ask, "who am I for this holy task?"

A few months ago, I sat with a woman whom I'll call Ethel. She told me that that each day she wakes up and thanks God for the life that she's had, and tell Him that she is ready to die.

She lived fully, with beauty and grace and tragedy and resilience.
And now, her husband has been dead for a few years.
Now, her friends are all dead or dying.
Now, she has arthritis and her hip has a slight fracture and she's losing her eyesight.
And she knows that there is Heaven.
She knows that all the good that is in all the people she has loved can't have just vanished. All that good and all that love must endure.
Ethel's loved ones are waiting for her, and she's ready to join them whenever God will allow it. She was ready to die.

When I had first spoken with Ethel months earlier, she wasn't ready yet. She needed to talk with me about the painful parts of her life. She longed for her husband, and their son had died too soon. But every day she still thanked God for all the good that moved through her life.

I heard her stories and her faith and suffering, and I felt furious.
My mind raged, "How could she have suffered so much and still believe in this God of Goodness!? Why is she turning to this faith when she's experienced such pain!?"

When Ethel told me that she felt that God had sent me to her I just felt angrier. I went back to my office and typed out what I was feeling. In my own life, over the past few years I have been grieving deeply; too many beloved people dying long before their time. I find myself furious at God for their deaths, and I wanted Ethel to be furious along with me. At one point in my notes I plead with her. I desperately cry out "How can you say God is good when horrible things happen?"

Classic question, right?

I think it's in Moses' mind too.

When Moses asks, “who am I?” God answers by telling Moses, “I will be with you.” This answer “I will be with you,” does not directly answer Moses’s question “who am I?” “Who Am I?” “I will be with you.” - It doesn’t fit together so well.

The Medieval commentator Rashi explains That Moses’s question of “who am I?” is really an expression of self-doubt. Moses is really asking, “How am I important enough to speak with Pharaoh?” In this scenario, God’s response of “I will be with you” means that “this task belongs to God too,” and God is important enough for the project.

After asking “who am I?” Moses then, ever politely, asks God, “And when the Children of Israel say to me “What is the name of the one who sent you?” what should I say?” Moses seems now to be asking “Who are you, God? What’s your name?”

But I think there is more behind this question. Moses isn’t asking a hypothetical question for the future; this question is bubbling up from within himself. If I can translate that question “what is your name?” loosely, I’d say that Moses is asking, “Who am I? And who the hell are You?”

I hear Moses crying out, “The children of Israel have been enslaved 400 years! I tried my best to seek justice there, and I failed and my people are still enslaved! I ran away from that mess! I’ve made my life here. Who the hell are You, with your magical burning bush to swoop in and say, “Go to Pharaoh, for “I’ll be with you” because where the hell have You been?”

There are moments in our lives when that is our most earnest prayer.

God! Look at this world! Look at the tragedy and injustices of our world! Look at the wounds within every heart! Where the hell are you!? Moses, unlike me, gets a very direct verbal response. God answers this question with the name “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh;” I will be that I will be.

Rashi, that medieval commentator, also lived through the first crusade in which Jews were massacred by the thousands, and could certainly have asked God “Where the hell are you?” He explains that this name Ehyeh is God’s promise to be not just with Moses, but with all of the children of Israel. According to Rashi, God is saying, “I will be with you in this trouble, just as I will be with you in other troubles.” God promises to be present with the Israelites in Egypt and with the Jews during the crusades, and through all time.

God senses that this promise might not be enough for Moses, so God says, “I will be with you, and this is a sign for you that I sent you.” God promises him a sign.

Ibn Ezra, another medieval commentator, explains that some say that the signs are the words themselves. The words, "I will be with you" are themselves a sign to Moses. Ibn Ezra says that all words "share many meanings in our sacred language." Words are words, *and* words are signs, and all of it is sacred. Each word, each sign, carries many meanings. In our holy language, in our holy world – the signs of God's presence vary, but God is with us.

In the course of my chaplaincy, I was reflecting on how exhausted I found myself after a particular encounter. In that reflection, I wrote,

I want to ask myself how I find God moving in this encounter – and I hate the question. I ask myself what the careseeker's sense of Higher Power teaches me – and I hate that question too.

I wonder if part of what makes me so tired in this work is that I'm doing it without God. I wonder if part of what's making me tired is the energy I spend keeping God away.

Sometimes our most earnest prayers are, like Moses', asking, "Where the Hell are you?! I'm seeing plenty of signs – of terrible suffering. Where the Hell are you?"

And sometimes our work is to let God be present. To let ourselves see whichever glimmer of a sign that we can, and then to let ourselves see another glimmer, until...I'm not sure yet. I'm just beginning to see some glimmers – but I like them.

Rashbam, who was Rashi's grandson, wrote that God's presence would allow Moses to come to Pharaoh without fear, and that when Moses did inevitably become fearful standing before Pharaoh, he will be able to recall God's sign and know that God is with him even then. God's presence allows Moses to fear less.

Pastoral care works in a similar way. We chaplains go with people to their darkest fears, and then they are able to fear less. Maybe I helped Ethel feel a little less fear, but I think she was doing pretty well already. She knew that sooner or later, she'd rejoin her loved ones in Heaven. Instead, I think she was a sign to me. She told me that God sent me to her, but if that's the case I imagine God also sent her to me. I see in her acceptance and faith and even God's gentle grace that endures even through grief and loss.

And so I offer this tiny prayer. God who was with our ancestors, and is with us now – keep being with us. And keep on sending those signs.