

## ***The God of My Ancestors***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
November 27, 2022 – Morning Worship on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Text: Exodus 3:7-15

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent! For those of you who are only somewhat familiar with the term, Advent is from the Latin and means “coming” or “arrival.” This is appropriate since Advent is the liturgical season of the church year when we prepare once again to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Advent in the church actually marks the beginning of the liturgical year on the first Sunday of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas.<sup>1</sup> The passing of the four weeks of Advent are marked by the candles on an Advent wreath such as the one we have on our altar. The meaning of those candles, and the order in which they are lit, varies according to the particular Advent wreath ritual one decides to use. This year the candles on our Advent wreath will represent Hope on Advent 1, Peace on Advent 2, Love on Advent 3 and Joy on Advent 4. The center candle, traditionally white, is lit on Christmas Eve to symbolize the birth of Baby Jesus.

Our theme for Advent this year is simple. Literally. Our theme is “celebrate the simple.” I chose this intentionally as life these days seems increasingly fraught with too much anxiety over too many things. Days are jam packed and schedules are filled with too much to do in too little time. That’s why it seemed to me that the best way we could possibly spend this Advent season together is to help each other “celebrate the simple.” We are going to use these weeks of preparation to remind ourselves of the foundations of our faith through story, song and prayer. Our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

Advent wreath itself is unusual as it attempts to bring this idea of “foundation” to life. It is constructed with beach stones and river stones as its base, the greens added in a simple pattern around the candles. The unusual candles were some I found in Lynn’s candle “stash” in the gift baskets prep area of the church which I fell in love with as soon as I saw them. This find also saved me my usual frantic trip to Michaels to find candles! Simplicity!

We’re also doing something very different with our creche this year. As you have heard me talk about on previous Sunday mornings, we are not using our usual traditional handmade ceramic creche set. Instead, we are going to use the creche in a new way to remind ourselves that the story of the birth of baby Jesus has been told and retold for millennia, everywhere around the world. The wide variety of creche sets which result is a powerful reminder of this simple but often overlooked Christmas truth. The images of the original Christmas story from the Gospels is central to Christian hearts around the world. Each culture tells that story in its own way, with its own unique creche designs representing how the birth of Baby Jesus would have looked in their world. With this incredible diversity in mind, this year we are creating together our Misfits Creche made up of whatever pieces you bring in for me to use. This week only the animals are visible in our cheche, waiting for their special visitor who will be coming in a few weeks. When the service ends this morning, you might enjoy coming forward to check out the misfits who are already in our creche. I can’t wait to see who else will join us as the weeks move along!

This brings me to our Scripture focus for today and for that I have chosen one of the foundational texts for the Jewish and

Christian faiths from the book of Exodus. Again, this is a departure from what would be the usual Scripture focus on one of the prophets, usually Isaiah or Jeremiah. Those are beautiful texts and I truly love them all, explaining as they do the ancient vision for what we Christians understand to be the foretelling of the birth of Christ. We'll hear those texts during the Lessons and Carols service coming up on December 18 so we won't miss them entirely! This year, though, I wanted us to think about more than beautiful prophecies focusing on God's vision for humanity, thus far unfulfilled. I want us to think about, on this first Sunday in Advent, where we first learned, along with Moses, God's name.

As this story begins and God is speaking with Moses, God consistently refers to God's self as "the God of your ancestors," a phraseology as confusing to Moses as it is to us. And why wouldn't it be? The God of our ancestors? What does that even mean? Well, pretty much what it sounds like it means. Up until this point in the unfolding story of God's interactions with God's people, the people have been pretty simplistic in how they understood God and God's role in their lives. They knew of God because of God's interactions with their ancestors, stories they had heard over and over again. Remember, at this point, there are no written scriptures, no centralized place of worship. The Ten Commandments didn't even exist yet. Only the stories of this incredible God who chose these people – the Israelites – as God's people. God was directly involved with the lives of their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God knew them as people yet at this point, God knew their names, but they did not yet know God's name. Faced with a seemingly impossible task, Moses needed to know more, and wouldn't we all in Moses' place.

Today's story from Exodus is part of a larger story we all know well. This is the second half of the story of Moses and the burning bush. This story is a seminal story of the Torah. It explains how it is that Moses came to be the one to go to Pharaoh and tell him God wanted the Israelites to be released from their captivity. This is the same Moses of floating basket on the Nile fame which saved his life and brought him into the royal household – another amazing story but way beyond the scope of our ponderings this morning. This event happens later in Moses life when he has been cast out of Egypt into the desert where he was expected to die. But he didn't. Instead, he found himself living with and eventually married to one of the daughters of a sheik named Jethro. By the time of this morning's story, Moses has been living there contentedly for some years, tending the sheep of his father-in-law. He notices off in the distance what appears to be a burning bush, but the flames do not consume the bush. He decides to investigate, and this is where his encounter with God's own self takes place. God proceeds to explain to Moses that he has heard the cries of his people Israel in Egypt and that God intends to free them and Moses is going to help. Moses is going to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that God wants the people released.

Moses, understandably, feels this task is way beyond his capabilities but he stalls for time by asking questions. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" he asks. God says essentially, "don't worry because I will be with you." Then Moses gets to the crux of the matter. He asks God who he should say is this God who is helping him. After all, up to now God has just self-identified as "the God of your ancestors; the

God of Isaac, Abraham and Jacob.” But, impressive as this was, it was still not a name. Moses wanted a name. “If they ask me what is his name, what do I say to them.” And that’s when God gives the most surprising answer ever. God says “I AM WHO I AM.”

On the surface, this seems like some sort of cosmic double-speak. I AM WHO I AM. What does that mean exactly? Just what it says, actually. By answering I AM WHO I AM, God is claiming that God just is. God’s very existence is the sum total of God’s identity. God is not the sun god or the thunder god or the war god. God is God. God is God because God is. Simple. Basic. Foundational to everything that comes after it. I AM WHO I AM is the name of Moses’ God, the name of Isaiah’s God the name of Jesus’ God and Father. I AM WHO I AM is the name of our God and in that name everything about faith and life, about hope and new beginnings is contained. God is because God is. God is indescribable. God is limitless. God does not fit neatly into human definitions or even the human desire to categorize God into something we can understand, perhaps even control. God is beyond all that. God simply is. And just like God told Moses, the rest is up to us. I AM WHO I AM told Moses to go to Egypt and do God’s work of freeing the Israelites from the most powerful sovereign on earth. And God had little patience with Moses’ hesitancy. “I will be with you,” God tells Moses, as if that mere statement was enough. And here’s the thing. It was. Moses had trouble believing that. We have trouble believing that thousands of years later! But it’s still true. I AM WHO I AM is a God who defies description and is beyond understanding in any human way. That’s what makes God, God. Simple.

But it's not, is it. How can God's name be a declarative sentence? It just is. Because God just is. God's name is a statement of being. God is because God is. It is beautifully simple and profoundly complex at the same time. And that, dear ones, is what makes God so amazing. God's identity, according to God's own self, is directly connected for all eternity to God's creation – his beloved humanity. God is the God of Moses' ancestors and of ours. And that's true even if you grew up in a home without God as a part of it. Just by virtue of being you, God was a part of your life because God is the ground of all being. I AM WHO I AM knew you before you were born and has loved you every moment of your life. I AM WHO I AM longs for you to claim your life as God intends for you. God wants you to be who you are! God wants you to be who God created you to be and that, dear ones, takes a lifetime to discover and understand. God wants nothing more for you than to live with the hope that the great I AM knows your name. Your being is part of God's being and whatever is ahead for you, God will be with you, just as God has always been.

This holiday season between Thanksgiving and Christmas is celebrated in so many different ways, unique to each family and even each person. We all have those holiday traditions we love and the ones that irritate the heck out of us. We all have the Christmas movies we can't wait to watch and the ones we refuse to watch. Some of our homes are completely decked out for Christmas already and some of us aren't quite up for that just yet. Some of us love nonstop Christmas music on the radio and nonstop Christmas movies on television and some of us don't. Some of us have live Christmas trees that fill an entire room. Others of us are content with a small one that sits on a table. All

of us, at this time of year, are filled with Christmas memories long past. Some of those memories are delightful, warming our hearts as we consider them. Some are anything but, threatening to tarnish any joy we might find in the celebrations of Christmas. All of those memories are connected to our very own sense of the God of our ancestors since Christmas has always been, at its core, the story of Jesus' birth. For some of us, that story was always front and center while for others Santa was the only person of Christmas we really understood.

That's why this year I hope you will use this Advent and Christmastide season and all our celebrations here in the church as an opportunity to know more about the original Christmas story – the one which came to us from the generations before us. I encourage you to think about the God of your ancestors. Was God a part of your life growing up? If yes, how? What adult first told you about God? What pastors or Sunday School teachers or youth leaders or camp counselors helped to guide you to the God of your adult life. If God was not part of your life in childhood, consider how that absence influences your approach to faith as an adult. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Both are possible!

Finally, especially during this Advent season, I invite you to give yourself a gift and spend some time thinking about God's name – I AM WHO I AM! Dare to search for your own sense of being and purpose within the great I AM. Work to find the hope of new beginnings always possible, even when nothing seems further from your reality. Our God's name is an enigma, a riddle within a conundrum that provides *the* answer and no answer. I AM WHO I AM promises you that God's very essence knows no limits. There is no place you can be where God is not. There is no

situation you will encounter that is beyond God's scope of awareness. Note that this way of understanding God suddenly puts a whole new spin on Mary's encounter with Gabriel and her subsequent pregnancy. Virgin birth? Does it matter? All we need to know is that I AM WHO I AM – God's essence – took on flesh in that precious baby Mary bore so long ago. In that moment, the world changed and is still changing. Our task is to figure out how the great I AM needs us to be a part of it, whatever and however that might be. Dear ones, life is an adventure placed before us by the God of our ancestors, the great I AM. Where will it take us this year? I am excited to find out and I hope you are too. Christmas is coming! Thanks be to God! Amen.