

## “Grounded in Being”

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Based upon Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 46

Have you ever thought a biblical text meant one thing, and then been led by the Spirit to understand it in a whole new way? It happens to preachers more than you would realize. For example, this week, since it is Labor Day weekend, a holiday originally created both to recognize the hardworking laborers in our nation and to give them a day off, I thought I would do a nice, simple sermon on the importance of resting, and the challenges we face when we try to be human beings and not just “human doings.” Even during the surreal time of the pandemic, most people I know have been consumed with busyness. They either have been trying to figure out how to work endless shifts in hospitals or grocery stores, or work from home in new virtual ways while home schooling or entertaining their children, or they have been making the most of their time off in confinement— baking sourdough bread, learning new languages, walking new puppies, cleaning out closets. Generally speaking, Americans are not particularly good at sitting still and doing nothing, at approaching life in a contemplative way. We tend to measure our value in terms of our productivity. “What did I do today?” we ask ourselves. “Was it enough, or did I waste hours that could have been spent on improving something in my life or the world?” So, I picked a couple of Scripture passages that I thought would fit this theme of needing to slow down and reflect: the psalm that includes the famous line “Be still and know that I am God!,” and the story of Moses meeting God for the first time, and learning that God wanted to be identified as “I am “or in some translations, “Being.” “This is what we need to do more of,” I thought, dwell comfortably in “being” not just “doing.” If we are made in the image of God and God is being, then surely if we work at it, we can also find the “being” in us.

I still think that would be a worthwhile endeavor for all of us to undertake, even as I recognize the irony in saying we need to “work” at doing nothing. But when I spent half the week studying these texts, I discovered that there is much more to being “grounded in Being” than resting and keeping still. As it turns out, that famous line from *Psalm 46* is really a misleading translation because it doesn’t say “Be still” in the sense of just sit cross-legged and say “Ohm” for twenty minutes each morning and you’ll feel like a whole new person. In the Hebrew, the word translated “be still,” *raphah*, has much more of a gut punch to it; it means “surrender,” “let go,” or even in some circumstances “be weak or vulnerable.” I don’t know about you, but I suspect that the only thing that most of us have a harder time doing than resting is surrendering and being vulnerable. Yet here in this psalm that is exactly what the God of Jacob, our God, commands.

Even more remarkably, God issues this command right when surrendering seems like the worst possible thing to do. As James Mays observes, this psalm “begins with the dangers of an unstable world.”<sup>1</sup> There are two huge threats to stability in this story-song. The first is from nature. The earth is changing; the mountains are shaking; the waters are roaring and foaming. Basically, the cosmos is in turmoil and there is no stable ground in a very literal sense. The

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<sup>1</sup> Mays, James L., *Psalms, Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 183-84.

second threat to Israel compounds the first because the nations are also in an uproar. Kingdoms are tottering because of human warfare, so there is no stable political ground either. In this psalm, the people are vulnerable to so many things; they are in full fight-or-flight mode. They want to do something, not nothing. Their lives are at stake, and they need to fix things fast.

As the psalmist recounts all of this in the third person, God suddenly interrupts with a first-person imperative command: “Knock it off! Surrender and know that I am God!” This isn’t a command to practice self-care and Sabbath-keeping, however important those practices may be; it’s a command to stop behaving as if history is subject to our wills only. It’s a command to nature and humanity to remember that God is in charge, that it is God’s will to be present in our lives, and that whatever God wills will happen regardless of what we do. When we really know God and surrender to that truth that God is in charge and with us, then God becomes our refuge and strength, no matter what is going on in the world. It is that knowledge that gives rest to the soul.

Moses thought that to know God in this way, he first needed to know the name of God. After God got his attention with a burning bush and commissioned him to go to Pharaoh to help free the Hebrew slaves, Moses was not yet ready to surrender and accept that plan for his life. So, he started raising objections as politely as he could. “Look God, thanks for thinking of me,” he said, “but I’m a nobody. For the kind of job you’re talking about, you really should use someone powerful and influential, not a refugee shepherd living in the wilderness.” “I will be with you,” God said, as if that put an end to that objection. This led Moses to take a slightly different tact. “How can I go to the Israelites and tell them I’m going to lead them into freedom with your help. At the very least they are going to ask me your name, and I don’t even know that. Who shall I say I’m working for?” This was actually quite a bold and dicey thing to ask because in those days people believed that to know the name of something was to have power over it. God could have squashed Moses for being so presumptuous; and maybe Moses hoped in his heart that God would do just that, and in so doing let him off the hook for having to be God’s new ambassador. But instead of reprimanding him, God answered Moses’ question with a reply that raised more questions than it answered. “I am who I am,” God said. “Tell the Israelites that ‘I am’ sent you.”

The word that is translated “I am” is four consonants in Hebrew, better known as the Tetragrammaton: YHWH, which we pronounce today as “Yahweh,” the name of God. Bible scholar Clayton Raymond Bowen once observed that “no single word in Hebrew has ever evoked such a torrent of discussion as YHWH.”<sup>2</sup> The word is based upon the Hebrew verb for “to be” or “to exist,” *hayah*. But in biblical Hebrew, verbs are grounded in action, not in time, as in English, so translating tenses in the English sense can be tricky. The phrase which God utters, *‘ehyeh asher eh-yeh*” can be translated “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” or “I will cause to be what I will cause to be” or “I am who I will be.” Because of that fluidity, it can also be translated as a gerund: “Being” or “Being There.” No one of these translations is more correct than another. The name of God really means all of these things simultaneously.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Gianotti, Charles R., “*The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH*”, BIBLIOTHECA SACRA January-March 1985, 38.

Given the mystery of this, for millennia scholars have tried to figure out what God was actually trying to tell Moses in that moment. Was God being evasive and not providing a name at all in response to Moses' impertinent question? Perhaps God was distinguishing Godself from all the false gods of the day. "I am the one who exists, as opposed to all those idols who don't really exist." Some think God was emphasizing God's role as creator: "I am the one who causes things to exist," or that this name somehow has to do with God's covenant with Israel: "I am the one who will redeem or has redeemed Israel." Confronted by the ambiguity of the expression, and reluctant to reduce our mysterious, all powerful God to something comparable to a creator, the great German theologian Paul Tillich took a more metaphysical approach and said that what God was conveying is that God is "the ground of being." To Tillich, this meant that God was "being," but not in the same sense that human beings are beings, not in the sense of being a creature. God was that which causes everything to exist, but was not just existence itself because God is living and interactive with Creation. God is our source of life, but is more than atomic energy. We are because God is that from which being comes, that which lives in and with us but is still distinct from us.<sup>3</sup>

Tillich has long been criticized for being too metaphysical in his understanding of God given what we know of God incarnate in Christ, and I must confess that as much as I find his perspective thought-provoking, trying to read and understand his writing always gives me a headache. I have to read every sentence about six times to translate his heady philosophy into something concrete. But regardless of whether Tillich meant "ground of being" ontologically or energetically or spiritually, I like that phrase, because I think that both of today's texts are trying to convey in their own ways a similar idea. God is "other" in a vast sort of way beyond our comprehension. God is the source of life and newness and therefore is more powerful than everything. Yet God is also invested in us, and with us in a surprising and deeply intimate way. Therefore, we are called to be grounded in God more than in our own striving and talents, or in the powers of the world. The one who both made us and wills to be with us, has the power and the desire to save us. So when the earth trembles and the waters roar, when the enemies and Pharaohs of the world threaten, we are called to be grounded in Being, not in the sense of being grounded in contemplation instead of action, but in the sense of being grounded in God. We are called to put our trust in and give our obedience to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Moses, the God embodied in Christ. This is the God above all other powers who is with us no matter what.

To be grounded in God this way does require surrendering the idea that we are in charge. It does require letting go to some degree of our anxiety and our illusions of control. Yet I do not think being grounded in Being means "Let go and let God!" in the sense of remaining passive in the face of injustice— look at what God made Moses do after all! But when there is instability all around, being grounded in Being with a capital B requires our telling ourselves again and again like a meditative mantra: "God is in charge and is with us. God made everything and can remake it all. God has a plan for good and nothing can destroy that plan. Nothing on earth or in heaven can separate us from the love of God." To be grounded in the ground of Being is to understand

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<sup>3</sup> Tillich, Paul, Systemic Theology Vol. 1 (Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago Press,1951), 345-240.

that when God said, “Tell them ‘I am’ sent you,” what God was effectively saying was “Tell them you’ve been talking to the real God who will always have their backs;” or in the words of R& B singer Michael McDonald, tell them: “Ya Mo Be There.” “Tell them what I say happens, and I say that I will be there with them and am in charge.”

Do you feel that you live your life as one who has surrendered to God or as one who carries the weight of the world on your shoulders? Do you feel grounded in your knowledge of God or in what *you* can do or what is happening around you? In contemplative Christianity, many guided meditations designed to lead us to know God and ourselves better begin with an exercise in getting grounded. You stand or walk in such a way that you direct all of your focus to your feet for a few minutes, feeling the weight of them in your shoes, feeling the difference between the softness of your socks and the hardness of the ground. You can even run your hands down your calves as if you are pushing and planting your legs in the ground. Once you feel rooted to the earth God created, then you can move to the next step which is letting go of your own agenda to let God in.

Paul Tillich himself had a grounding ritual of sorts. He didn’t do the leg thing; he went to visit the ocean. Describing these visits, Fred Buechner writes:

They say that whenever the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich went to the beach, he would pile up a mound of sand and sit on it gazing out at the ocean with tears running down his cheeks. One wonders what there was about it that moved him so... The beauty and power of it? The inexpressible mystery of it? ... Who knows? In his theology Tillich avoided using the word God because it seemed to him too small, denoting only another being among beings. He preferred to speak instead of the Ground of Being, of God as that which makes being itself possible, as that because of which existence itself exists. His critics complain that he is being too metaphysical. They say they can't imagine praying to anything so abstract and remote. Maybe Tillich himself shared their difficulty. Maybe it was when he looked at the ocean that he caught a glimpse of the One he was praying to. Maybe what made him weep was how vast and overwhelming it was and yet at the same time as near as the breath of it in his nostrils, as salty as his own tears.”<sup>4</sup>

I don’t know what Tillich saw in the ocean. But I know that when nature and nations are in turmoil, it’s easy to feel very small and very helpless. So, make sure you are taking the time, either sitting still or moving, to remember that God is more powerful than even the vast expanse of the sea, and wills good for us and the cosmos. History is not subject to *our* will alone. Don’t surrender to injustice but surrender to the idea that it’s up to us alone to confront it. We are not in charge and we are not alone. We serve the one whose very name conveys “I will be there.” Trust, believe, and ground yourself in the source of life and love, hope, and grace, the God we call Yahweh. For like Moses we have a job to do, but we can’t do it until we first know who it is who sends us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Buechner, Frederick, Quotes of the Day, *Ocean*, at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2020/9/1/ocean>; originally published in Frederick Buechner’s *Beyond Words*.