

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“For a Mars Bar”

August 28, 2011

Reverend Art Ritter

Exodus 3: 1-15

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ ⁵ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ ⁶ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ ¹¹ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ ¹² He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

13 But Moses said to God, ‘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 his name?” what shall I say to them?’ ¹⁴ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.”’ ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

I recall my history classes at Alma College. The head of the department was Dr. M.J.J. Smith. He didn't go by a title or a first or last name. He was simply M.J.J. He was an odd sort of man, rather large and rotund with baggy pants and a shirt that always looked like he had slept in it. In the middle of his lectures he would always take out a Winston cigarette from his shirt pocket, never light it, but hold it between his fingers as he lectured. M.J.J. had a very large head without a single strand of hair upon it. Because of this we nicknamed him “The Great Buddha.” He would rub his hand over the top of that huge head every time he asked his students a question. M.J.J. was one of the nation's foremost experts on Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. He knew everything there was to know about 20th century America. The rest of the professors in the department seemed to cower in his wake. The students in the department feared M.J.J. as if he were a god. If you were going to get any kind of job or graduate school recommendation, you had to impress M.J.J.

M.J.J. taught by the Socratic method, introducing a topic and then randomly selecting some lucky student to answer. If you successfully answered, you weren't done. He continued to press you with more questions to test your understanding. I can remember sitting in his

classes hoping, probably praying that he would not call upon me. But he did a few times, and the first time I was lucky enough to know that Alfred Mahan theories influenced Theodore Roosevelt's desire to have a strong navy. When M.J.J. finished with you, he would give a final response. It went like this, "Very good Mr. Ritter. You get one Mars' bar." I don't know if Mars' bars still exist today but I believe at one time they were advertised as a prize for a job well done. They were a reward when you had finished a task and were off the hook. If you got things right, you got a Mars' bar.

In the Scripture lesson this morning, Jesus, as he often does, plays the role of a questioner, a teacher putting his students through their paces much like M.J.J. He and his disciples had entered Caesarea Philippi, carrying with them the satisfying memories of the miracles, teachings, and healings they had witnessed. Things were good. The disciples were quite comfortable following Jesus around. Now he figured it was time to put them to the test. How much did they really understand about discipleship? How well were they getting this any of it?

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The answers came freely, just as history and tradition pointed to who Jesus might be- Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist. This is what they had heard and if you don't really know the answer to a question it is best to repeat something you've heard. Then came a harder question, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am? What is it that you believe me to be?" This question was personal. The pressure was really on those disciples. They probably looked away or stared at their feet hoping someone else would provide an answer. Eventually Peter bailed them out. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This was the first time anyone had called Jesus the Christ. It was a turning point for both Jesus and for Peter.

Peter might have deserved a Mars' bar for his answer that day. He was truly put on the spot by Jesus. He was sweating it out. His knowledge and his understanding were questioned. The question was a way for Jesus to evaluate how his teachings and example were being integrated into the lives and deeds of his followers. Jesus had reached a point where he knew that if God's Kingdom were to grow, the truth of faith in God had to be owned, acknowledged, embodied, and communicated by his followers.

Who do you say that I am? Who is Jesus in our lives? Each day, in clear and in quiet, subtle ways we are asked the question. We need to earn the Mars' bar. We can try to sit in the back room of life and hope that the question will not get answered. We can stare at the ground in awkward silence, hoping that someone else will speak up before we are called upon. We can go through the motions pretending we know and trusting foolishly that the question will never really come to us. But eventually the question will come. Eventually we will have to know. Who do **you** say that I am? It is that little word "you" that makes all the difference. It is the difference between talking and doing. It is the difference between believing and knowing. Second hand answers won't serve. We can't copy from someone else's paper because the answer isn't written down. The multi-lettered words of theologians won't help either. Our family traditions won't be of assistance. Our membership in a church will not provide immunity from the query.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a woman who walked out of her church during the closing hymn of the worship service. It was a stirring service, the word and music touched her heart and soul. But she was in a hurry to get home and wanted to beat the crowd. On her way down the steps she bumped into a thin, rather lost-looking man who was standing on the sidewalk. The man had been staring up at the cross on the very top of the church's steeple. The woman excused herself for her clumsiness and started to walk away to her car. But the man quickly called her back. "Tell me," he said, pointing to the door that she had just exited, "just what is it that you believe in there?" The woman opened her mouth to offer a quick answer but the words didn't come. Suddenly she realized that she didn't really know the answer to the question. At the very least she didn't know how to put the answer into words. She stood there for a few moments silently, trying to compose herself and find something intelligent to say. Finally the man simply said, "Never mind. I am sorry if I bothered you." And with that he walked away down the street.

But the man did bother her. More accurately, his question bothered her. It was a question that went to the core of her very being, the place where word and deed are supposed to come together. It was a question that asked her to examine her beliefs and to acknowledge her doubt. Yet it was a question she wasn't certain she could honestly answer. That bothered her most of all. It was a question that interrupted and consequently shook her ordered world and presented a challenge she wasn't prepared to handle.

Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote of the philosophy that is part of too many Christian lives. He called his fellow Christians "shopkeeping souls," people who were busier engaging in dull second-hand religious activity instead of bone-rattling passion. Kierkegaard's classification of shopkeeping souls is probably what Jesus was trying to avoid. He wanted followers he could call upon when even when their hand wasn't raised. He wanted disciples who knew the answer long before the question was asked. He wanted to build the Kingdom with those who moved past nice ideas and holy sounding concepts to service which required heart and soul and mind and strength.

None of us may see ourselves as the prime defenders of the faith. No one may deem themselves wise enough or erudite enough to speak to every question or doubt that faces Christianity. Yet as Willimon writes, "at the end of each sermon Jesus did not say, 'agree with me?' He said, 'Follow me.'" We must constantly answer the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Our answer comes in articulating our understanding about who Jesus is for us and what it means to follow him in word and deed. Our answer comes in how we share what participation in the Christian community means for our lives. Our answer comes in how we face the difficult days of life. Our answer comes in how we explain the use of our time and our money. Our answer comes in how we justify our choices at a certain time. Our answer comes when we are forced to take our beliefs and convictions and move them into action. We need to know how to answer the question, in sentence and in deed, with a convincing display of what the good news means for us in each day and in each interaction with one another. "Who do you say that I am?" Will we earn the Mars' bar?