

## ***Holy Curiosity***

May 7, 2017

Exodus 3:1-15

Canadian Music Month in Celebration of Canada's 150th!

By Rev. John Suk

Irene and I moved to The Philippines in 2003. I was a seminary professor and Irene did Couples Counselling in the expat community. The expat community was mostly made up of business people, diplomats, and development workers. One person we met at a party even confessed to being a CIA agent sent to The Philippines to make local contacts, just in case the American military ever had to drop by.

This crowd was also full of cross-cultural couples. Going to expat schools, clubs, and embassy receptions brought people from all over the world together—and, not surprisingly, they paired off: Scandinavians with West Africans, Filipinos with Syrians. No surprise there.

Some of these multiethnic couples eventually came to Irene's office. They had all the same hopes and dreams, challenges and problems that other couples do.

After working with a number of multiethnic couples, and after reading all the literature she could put her hands on, Irene discovered that one quality stood out as being essential for such couples if they were going to live happily ever after. Curiosity.

If you are a part of a multiethnic couple, curiosity helps attach you to each other: curiosity about the other's place of birth, curiosity about each other's families of origin, curiosity about language and culture, geography and gender roles and on and on. Endless curiosity.

Of course, curiosity about your partner is essential for all relationships—but only more so when your partner has a very different background than you, comes from a place strange to you . . .

As God was strange to Moses. Curiosity plays a key role in the Bible story we read today. In our scripture for today, God uses Moses' curiosity to draw him in, and to hold him tight.

First, God uses a curiosity to draw Moses in. Moses was herding sheep. It was sort of sad, actually. He had once been a prince of Egypt. He was living the life of Riley and was probably headed for his own little pyramid in death. But Moses killed a man—a bad man, to be sure. Still, even then, vigilantism wasn't smart and so Moses had to run for his life, and the best he could do after was find a job herding sheep in the desert.

And, one day, he sees a burning bush. Strange, but not impossible. Someone might have left a campfire unattended. But after watching it for a while, what was surpassing strange was that the bush didn't stop burning. It was almost as if it were plugged into a propane tank.

So Moses says, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." He is curious. He wants to know more. Moses' curiosity, here, is like that of the "wondering" wandering Hunters in the Huron Carol who turn aside to the broken birch bark lodge *when* they see and hear the angels. They are curious. The burning bush is like the Peacemaker's stone canoe that nevertheless floats, as in the song about Hiawatha that we'll soon hear. Curiosity.

And when Moses finally comes upon the bush, a voice says, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Moses obeys. And then voice from the bush says, "Listen. My people are suffering. Go tell Pharaoh to let them go." Well, that's interesting. Especially because Moses is curious. He wants to know who is sending him on this audacious task. So Moses asks the voice in the burning bush: "What is your name?"

And, according to this story, the voice in the bush says, "YHWH." A curious answer, one that Jews and Christians, theologians and linguists have puzzled over ever since. It might mean something like, "I am." Or, "I am whoever," or "I am on my way." The divine name is a mystery.

So, right there, at the beginning of Israel's history and all Western religion, God uses a riddle to attach Whoever to us, and curiosity about the answer to that riddle, "Who is God, anyway?" is one of the strings that has attached us to YHWH ever since.

What first drew the Jews into the arms of God? It wasn't fear of hell. Not hope for heaven. Not even faith that Moses could actually get them out of Egypt—because that seemed impossible. No, when all else seemed silly or hopeless or unknowable, what first drew the Jews into the impossible liberation they have forever since celebrated was a name they would never understand, but be curious about, forever after.

I started by saying that curiosity is necessary for cross-cultural marriages to work. I went on to say that curiosity was one of the things that drew Moses to God at the burning bush and that curiosity about who God really was is at the root of all Western religion. But now I want to say something else about curiosity. Curiosity is a spiritual gift and discipline, both. And as Canadians who share this land with other more ancient nations, we are still in dire need of curiosity.

How so? Well, we, as Christians and Canadians need to be curious about our neighbours if we are going to figure out how to love them. Just as two people in a relationship have to be curious about each other to make it a loving relationship, just as we have to be curious about who God is if we're going to learn to live as free people, just so, altogether, we need to cultivate a deeply rooted, spiritual curiosity about our neighbours if we are going to figure out how to love them.

And the neighbours I'm talking about today, of course, are our First Nations neighbours.

Which gets me to the heart of this morning's message. At the urging of Kenny Kirkwood, I asked Father Norman Casey, a Mi'kmaq Anglican priest with the Six Nations in the Grand River territory, to preach today.

It only made sense to ask Father Casey. He is a well-known and deeply appreciated spokesperson for Canada's First Nations. He's a warm and interesting personality. He is a prophet. He seemed, to me, to be a great choice.

But Father Casey declined my invitation.

You see, before he comes, he wants to know whether or not we are truly curious about the First Nations. Many Canadians are not. Many of us, in fact, are tired of hearing about First Nations in the news—the land claims, the reconciliation process, the water woes, the Highway of Tears. So we stop paying attention. That's why, in his excellent book, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*, Thomas King writes:

*The sad truth is that, within the public sphere, within the collective consciousness of the general populace, most of the history of Indians in North America has been forgotten, and what we are left with is a series of historical artifacts and, more importantly, a series of entertainments . . . As a series of entertainments, Native history is an imaginative cobbling together of fears and loathings, romances and reverences, facts and fantasies into a cycle of creative performances, in Technicolor and 3-D, with accompanying soft drinks, candy, and popcorn.*

At first, I was disappointed that Father Casey didn't want to visit till we visited him. I mean, someone has to go first, right? But as successful middle-class Canadians, as Christians committed to loving our neighbours, as people who might not have asked for white privilege but mostly understand what it is, and as people who know something about holy curiosity from Moses and others in scripture, I think we should take Father Casey's invitation seriously, and visit him at the Six Nations reservation in Brantford. To help us get beyond the cobbling together of our fears and loathings, romances and fantasies that Thomas King writes about. We should visit the Six Nations in Brantford to satisfy the same curiosity that drew Moses to the burning bush and the people of Israel to YHWH.

So we're setting it up. In fact, already this Spring, our youth will go on a retreat to the reservation, to begin the "getting to know you" process. And then, this fall, on a Saturday in late September or early October, we will exercise our curiosity by taking a busload of LPCC members of all ages to the Six Nations Reservation to see their church, their museum, to eat together, and to learn more about First Nation history and culture—from them. It will be fascinating and fun. We'll come home wiser and a bit more attached to each other.

And on the Sunday following, we'll get Rev. Casey will preach here.