



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *“Introduction to Christian Mysticism”*

### *“God as Being or a Being.”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
November 2, 2025

**Scripture Reading:** Exodus 3:1-5 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock deep into the wilderness, Moses came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The messenger of YHWH\* appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a thornbush. Moses saw—“The bush is ablaze with fire, and yet it isn't consumed!” Moses said, “Let me go over and look at this remarkable sight—and see why the bush doesn't burn up!” When YHWH\* saw Moses coming to look more closely, God called out to him from the midst of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” Moses answered, “I am here.” God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground!*

*\* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.*

## Sermon

When I was very young, what I wanted more than anything—I was very nerdy, which has completely changed [laughter] —was my yacht that I didn't know I had. [laughter]

I wanted to have a mystical experience. I would read about people like Joan of Arc, like this story today, and I wanted, more than anything, to have that kind of experience of the deep meaning, the sacred. I was very immature, and so my idea of this enlightenment experience was very childish. I never thought for a moment that that would call me into activism to help other people. That didn't even occur to me. It was so selfish. I just wanted my little ego to get lifted up and be higher up and have all this wisdom to dole out on other people. I was fully prepared to hide my superiority. [laughter] I never thought that awakening would mean feeling more deeply and profoundly the pains of the world. I wanted to be lifted up to a higher level of comfort, to be comfortably numb. That was my idea of enlightenment.

What I didn't know completely then was that I'm going to die. I don't know if anybody's broken the news to you. [laughter] But, if you think about it, that one insight changes everything. As much as we superficially understand that, it's clear from our choices that we don't really believe it yet. The fact that I'm going to die means wealth means something very different. I can pile up wealth, join the MAGA movement, [laughter] pile up wealth to the moon, and it's completely hollow because I'm going to die. I didn't realize that my ego was my hell. My selfishness, my self-centeredness, my idea of trying to explain the universe in terms of me was my misery, was the cruelty I couldn't get rid of, was the fear that haunted me.

When I went to seminary, I would sneak off and read the mystics. I was an undercover mystic. [laughter] But mystic never meant supernatural. It never meant magical to me. It always meant going deeper into nature, deeper into life, deeper into human relationships. I'd go out to a park after lunch, and I'd read Burton and Lao Tse. I always related better to Eastern mystics than Western mystics. And indigenous mystics. Western mystics have these kinds of cartoon figures, supernatural beings that I couldn't really relate to very well.

I want us to talk [about this] for the next month or so, leading up to Christmas. You probably remember if you've been here at Christmas, that I think Christmas is the clearest time to understand Christian mysticism. The hymns of Christmas touch us like nothing else if you were raised in the church, most likely. They have what I think are the core mystical experiences. One, that you come from a depth that's beyond the storms that frighten you. Another is that you're interwoven into something larger than yourself which is where value comes from. Then finally, there's something that addresses you. Something is whispering to you through your experience, through life, that seems sacred.

We're going to look at those three senses and, later on, one other sense of the mystical. We're going to use the story of Moses and the burning bush. I don't think the ancient sages went to the trouble of crafting that story and just threw details together. I believe they were putting in a poetic framework what a mystical experience feels like, what it is like. Now, if you are a typical Presbyterian, what you've been taught is that that happened. There was a supernatural bush, and Moses is coming along and he sees that bush, and he experiences the sacred in a way that you never will.

That is the opposite of what these sages were trying to say.

Spoiler alert, every bush is a flame. You are Moses in the story. And it starts off with you being lost, confused. Moses is in a situation where his heart is broken because of politics. If you take the politics out of the story, you don't get any of it. God says to Moses, "Go to the Pharaoh and say, 'Let my people go.'" Is that political?

Could anything be more political? What does love mean if it doesn't say that? But that's the mature fruit, and we don't start off there. We start off as little spoiled brats. And that's okay. That's the seed. That's the only seed we have to work with at the beginning. We're transformed by the journey that's being talked about here. Moses is heartbroken. His people are in captivity. Pharaoh is wasting money on ballrooms. [subdued laughter]

Every week, it's a different nightmare. This week, maybe my favorite is that MAGA Republicans have been saying for years that they don't hate all immigrants, they just want people to be legal. Which has always been a crock. I hope if you are from that movement and you accidentally tripped across this church—. [laughter] First of all, sympathy.

Trump has blocked, I think, thirty-seven nations from immigrating. All of them are countries that have people of color. This week, Trump dropped the immigration number to something like 7,000. From what we've seen so far, most of those are going to be white people from South Africa who Trump feels are the most oppressed people in the world. Since he's not going to check on anybody else, we're stuck with that.

The story is trying to help us understand. If you think you're not political, if you think religion should not be political, that means you're high enough on the food chain where you don't have to take responsibility for the people that you're crushing. Let me say that again. If you think you're not political, if you think the status quo is just kind of a blank background, that means that you're high up enough in privilege where you don't have to take responsibility for what your life means to other people. Moses is realizing he's now got to either serve Pharaoh or the people. It's an either/or choice. If he decides to try to serve both, he'll just be serving the Pharaoh.

This week, the President had a beautiful party with a “Great Gatsby” theme. Did you hear about that? Now, far be it from me to accuse the President of ever having read a book. [laughter] Because part of what MAGA Republicans hate when they talk about liberal is liberal arts. Books and stuff. That teaches you to empathize with people who are different than you. They think that's weakness, and they attack it. They cut funds to people who have disabilities because they call it DEI. What is it DEI? *The Great Gatsby* was a satire about the hollowness of wealth. It was a satire about capitalism and what it does to your soul to value property over human beings. You can't do satire on that kind of hypocrisy. I don't even think it's hypocrisy. You couldn't line it up as often as they do. It's dissociation. What we're hearing is a cry of fear of people who know their religion doesn't work, their economic understanding is poisoned, but they don't know what to do. So, they're doubling down, they're playing the role of the Pharaoh.

In our story, Moses hears the name of God as I am. That's one of the ways of translating the divine name. But what it's saying to us is the mystical experience can begin with who you are. The way the story plants that seed is God first says to Moses, “Moses, Moses,” and then Moses says, “Here I am. I am.” Then later, the name of God is revealed as I am.

To realize that we come from a source that's deeper, you don't have to be supernatural about it. You don't have to be superstitious about it. But somehow, some way, you're coming from the depths of the Cosmos. Maybe it's *a* Being, but maybe the symbol of God reveals the nature of Being itself. That's the difference between traditional theology and mysticism. Traditional theology believes that God is *a* being, and mysticism remains silent before Being itself. Mysticism does not ask you to believe something that doesn't make sense to you. It invites you to go deeper in your heart. What is it that you come out of? Who are you? The more you open yourself to that question, the deeper down you go into an experience of your source. That's one of the meanings of the symbol “God” to a mystic. Another is that we belong to something that's larger than ourselves. These are not really things that are up for debate, right? We're all a part of

something bigger than ourselves, the web of life. If you've ever studied evolution at all, you realize that beings are interwoven.

Many people's theology does not reflect that understanding. They believe some people are going to heaven, some people are going to hell. Uh-uh. If your foot's in hell, if we're one body, and any part of that body is in hell, we're all going to feel it. There has to be healing for all of us.

In traditional theology, God is a mascot representing Christianity or Judaism or America. What is a deeper sense of unity? What is the deepest sense of unity you can think of? Moses is standing before this bush. And again, I believe it's an ordinary bush. I believe every bush is on flame with this insight. And Moses hears the bush, or the voice coming through the bush, saying, "I've heard my people cry." Is that true? I did mysticism. It's not what I was taught.

Mysticism can be the opening of a broken heart. It can be a greater love and a greater context, that when we see the despair of the world, we don't despair. When we see the pain of the world, we don't lose our peace of mind. I discovered my hell was my self-centeredness. There's no God in the universe that can rescue you from selfishness.

I mean, if you lifted me up to heaven, I'd be just as miserable, just as creepy there as I am here, right? [laughter] The temperature would be wrong. The harp music would get me irritable. [laughter] Can you imagine harp music for eternity?

The first idea is that we come from some profound mystery. The second is that we're part of something larger than ourselves that is a mystery to us. We can't step out of the universe and get the big picture. We're woven into it. It's only by loving and expressing ourselves that we have a sense of the tie that binds us. The last insight that we're going to look at today from this story is that there's another sense of the mystical in which every particle in the universe resonates with every other particle, which means you're never alone. There's always the rest of the universe whispering to you, speaking to you. Every fact you learn about the world is a tie that brings you deeper into your experience of life. We cannot hold reality at arm's length. It penetrates us. Beauty penetrates us. It can be like a knife stab. There is no objectivity for the human heart, and realizing that is a part of mysticism. It's the burning bush that tells you, don't get any closer. Just take your shoes off and sit here.

Anytime you give yourself to reverence, something will have something to teach you. Every bush, every animal, every plant. There's something whispering in your ear all the time. That's the third of the mystical conditions that we're going to look at today.

I believe as we look at the world right now, it's very hard for any of us to sleep at night. And I understand that. But also know there's a form of spirituality that's deeper than every storm we're talking about. It's a form of spirituality that recognizes we come from a depth that is completely beyond the surface level. I remember the first sermon I ever gave. I had this sense of great whales that were suffocating at the surface, profound souls that had never heard depth in sermons before. But the bar was so low, I've been able to survive the whole time. [laughter]

We are part of a web that gives our life meaning. We can't understand our lives without looking at each other. When our own lives are bankrupt, it's loving others that redefines what the situation is: finally to know that you're never alone.

We're going to be looking at each of these, and some profound experiences that people have. You can feel so abandoned and so alone if you don't realize that every particle in the universe is resonating, that the universe is teaching us, guiding us at all times. What I'm inviting you to do this month is to consider the difference between God as a symbol of *a* Being—which is what most of us were taught—and God as a symbol of the profound depths of your being. To me, a symbol doesn't work if it doesn't dissolve into your experience. Symbols should be like aspirin. They should dissolve into your experience where your life makes sense.

I want to thank you for putting up with me. We're about to head out on an adventure—for some of you, it won't be for the first time—to realize that however hopeless the world may seem from time to time, there's a type of experience that leads us deeper into life, broader into life, more immediately into life, so that the answer to every hope we have in every prayer is that love that is radical, universal, and grows into justice.

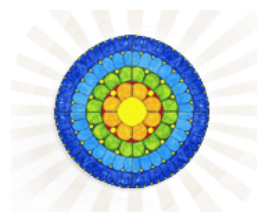
Thank you for your attention, and we'll take a moment for each of us to think about these words.

## Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

Each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



### St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

14311 Wells Port Dr.  
Austin, TX 78728  
512-251-0698  
admin@staopen.org