On several occasions through the years I’ve told my therapist, “I wish I could just crack my head open and let you see what’s there, because it’s so hard for me to put into words.” She and I both know a couple of things about that: (1) I mean both head and heart when I say that; and (2) That’s why one goes (well, I go) to therapy in the first place: to work out how to do precisely that, by truly feeling what I feel and then somehow fashioning that into words.

“Words are not simple things: they take unto themselves, as they have through time, power and meaning; they did so then, they do so now.” That is a quotation from *Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen*, a book I’ve been referring to for almost 30 years, and never quite accurately. The author is Fay Weldon, writing to her niece. A colleague of mine, fellow English teacher at the Illinois Math and Science Academy, mentioned it to me that long ago. I, without reading the book, jumbled all kinds of details, somehow having gotten the impression that Weldon was writing actual letters to her actual medical student niece in New Zealand. Turns out that she, Fay Weldon, had written a fictional account to a fictional niece while she, the author, was supposedly in Australia. Alice, the niece in the book is herself an aspiring novelist and a college undergraduate. I just felt I had to set the record straight.

The important bit for this morning, and just about every Sunday morning for me, is that words are complicated and tricky things, as well as our primary means for revealing our thoughts and emotions, beliefs and feelings-our selves—to others..

Whether we are conscious of it or not (and usually not), this tricky business of language is with us in every communication we attempt.

And if that is true, how much more true it is as we read texts from 3,000 years ago, describing events from much earlier than that, which have passed through at least four different languages before reaching us in English.

I wish we could somehow open the heads and hearts of those biblical writers to receive the truth directly. But in my opinion even if we had the authors seated before us, it would still be a tricky business.

As it is, we rely upon scholars and translators and interpreters to help us ferret out that meaning. And you, poor you, have to endure its passing through one last filter, that being myself. It’s no wonder that we pray in today’s collect “that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves” and ask God to guide us.

So: we approach this reading from Exodus with open hearts and open minds.

Imagine Moses who has taken his sheep “beyond the wilderness.” What a wonderful phrase that is, evoking in me at least two associations:

Moses was a shepherd, perhaps answering in part his own question to God in the burning bush, “Who am I to talk to Pharaoh and bring my people out of Egypt?” God doesn’t say it, but might have: “You’re a shepherd, that’s who. You’ll just be shepherding \people this time.”

And the second association is Moses’ having gone beyond the wilderness. We read that this morning, two weeks after having read of Jesus’ temptations within the wilderness. But he, too, was about to go beyond the wilderness into his three-year ministry and the beyond-the-wilderness of the human soul.

Next up in today’s reading from Exodus is God, speaking from the burning bush, establishing his credentials with Moses: a kind of pedigree as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then a kind of resume cast in human, sensory words (those complicated things we were talking about earlier): I observed the misery, heard their cry, know their sufferings, saw the oppression.

So get these people out of here, God tells him.

That’s when Moses asks the question, “Who am I?” As I said before, God didn’t go into any kind of resume or CV of Moses, didn’t refer to his being a shepherd. In fact, God pretty much ignores the question and says five significant words, “I will be with you.”

A possible interpretation of this seeming inattention to the question is, “It doesn’t matter who you are. What matters is that I will be with you.”

And then, after all this exposition, after God’s careful revelation of the divine Self, Moses has one last question: “Yes, but who will I say you are?”

And God tells him. A major example of the complexity, power, and meaning of words: “I am. Tell them, “I am has sent you.”

Biblical scholars and linguists have produced an abundance of interpretations of that “I am.” What I find most compelling in terms of that description of the Divine is something like, “always has been, is now, and always will be.” All of eternity, not bound by time nor space nor any other qualifier we can imagine. “Tell the Israelites,” God tells Moses, that “’Being itself’ has sent you to lead them.”

It left the Israelites without an argument, at least for a while. They knew that they had no power of themselves to help themselves out of their untenable situation in life and history. And they put themselves in the hands of someone appointed by the authentic eternal one.

Jesus came on the scene some 3,000 years after the episode described in Exodus. He, too, had penetrated the veil between the eternal divine and the mundane world of misery, suffering, and oppression. He was not merely an emissary sent by God to the Israelites, but God born into that world as a human being for all human beings everywhere and in every time.

We are called to hear and trust and believe God’s answer to Moses’ first question, a question each of us asks some time or another (or, more likely, time after time), “Who am I to carry on this life that’s so difficult, to try to reach others, to be of some use in this world while tending to my own problems? Who am I?”

And God’s answer to Moses and us is, “I will be with you.” + + +