

April 15, 2018

God's Forever Name

Exodus 3:13-15

Last week we began examining the stories of the Exodus by looking at the familiar story of Moses and the burning bush. This week we're staying there, looking at just one small part of that story. God has told Moses to go down to Egypt to set the people of Israel free, and Moses is explaining all the reasons he can't do that. We read Exodus 3, verses 13-15:

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.*

So Moses is trying to get out of the impossible task that God has just given him – as, I'm sure, I would have, too – and now is suggesting that the Israelites won't believe that he's really been sent by God. "What if they don't believe me? What if they ask me who you are? For that matter, who *are* you? Tell me your name!"

Now this seems a simple enough request, but in the Bible, it doesn't seem to be. God and God's representatives never answer that question. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with an angel all night, and as morning breaks the angel gives Jacob a new name – Israel, which means "one who struggles with God." Jacob then asks for the angel's name, and the angel says, "Why do you want to know that?" and leaves. In Judges 13, an angel appears to Samson's parents to foretell Samson's birth. Samson's father asks the angel's name, and he gets a similar reply: "Why do you ask my name? It's beyond your understanding, anyway." And in our passage, Moses asks, "What if they ask your name? What will I tell them?" And God replies, "I am who I am." Again, not really an answer.

Now preachers who talk about Greek and Hebrew in their sermons are both pretentious and dull. So, in advance, sorry about this. But Hebrew verbs are a little different from English ones. We separate our verbs by time: past tense, present tense, future tense. Hebrew doesn't. Hebrew verbs are either complete action or incomplete, sure or pending, certain or ambiguous. And in this passage, the verb "I am" is in the incomplete, pending, ambiguous verb form. As a result it could be translated a wide variety of ways: *I am who I am* or *I will be who I will be* or *I am who I've always been* or *I am whoever I might be*. You pick one. Or, better, pick all of them. The name that the Hebrews eventually settled on as the personal name of God is spelled YHWH – though we have no idea how to pronounce it – and apparently comes from that verb. For now, though, the point is that once again, God replies to Moses' request not with a name but a riddle.

Why? I think it's because possessing someone's name gives you a sort of control over that person. In Genesis 2, the first man's initial task was to give names to the animals, an expression of his dominion over the earth. Bullies and cowards try to express domination over people by ridiculing their names or giving them cruel nicknames. Telemarketers and salespeople

are taught to get the customer's first name and use it often in their sales pitches. In some cultures, especially tribal cultures, people have secret names, jealously guarded from outsiders, because again to give someone your name is to grant them some control. We Americans don't have secret names – except, sometimes, for romantic couples' pet names for each other – but I admit I do withhold my first name from salespeople. "Call me Mr. Morris." Having someone's name gives you some sense of influence over that person. And God won't do it. God does not grant us even the illusion of control. *Why do you ask my name? I am whoever I choose to be.*

It's kind of like the second of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt make no graven images." We sometimes assume that this refers to worshiping other gods, but that was already covered by the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other god before me." No, this one says, "You shall make no physical representation of a god, especially of me." You see, a carved idol is a thing you control. If you go somewhere, you can take with you, or leave it behind. You can display it prominently in your living room, or keep it in a closet until you want it. A carved image is under our management, and God doesn't play that game. Moreover, once you have a picture of God, you might think you've got God figured out. How many people have pictured God as an old man with a white beard, because that's how Michelangelo did it? Well, the same is true for names. Once we've labelled something, we have the impression that we've got it figured out. But God is the unimaginable and unnamed. We must never think we've got a handle on the mystery that is God.

But if God is beyond imagination and speech, how can we talk or think about God at all? Most of us don't operate in those mystic realms of meditating on the unnamable. God seems to recognize how frustrating all this "I am whoever" business might be, because in verse 15 we get this: *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"*

And suddenly we get historical specifics. *I am the God of your ancestors. I haven't given you my name, but you know theirs, and you know their stories. I am that God.* Here's what's implied in that statement. *I am the God who called Abraham to leave home and family in Haran and move to the land of Canaan, where I protected and blessed him. I am the God who made him the promise that he would have descendants beyond number, that they would inherit that land and become a blessing to all nations. I'm the God who gave Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age and who repeated Abraham's promise to that son, Isaac, and to his son, Jacob. I am the God who delivered Jacob's family from famine by bringing them to Egypt. I am the God who has been with your people from the beginning.* This is not an inexpressibly mysterious God, but this, too, is who God is. God is not just one who is beyond comprehension; God is the one who acts in history in tangible ways, which are remembered by tradition.

This brief narrative in Exodus 3 is perhaps God's most important self-disclosure in the Hebrew Bible, and these three brief verses underline the central paradox of the God who is both beyond the heavens and right beside us. But it's not the first time we've seen this. Even the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 preserve both sides of God. In Genesis 1, God is the one beyond space and time, who speaks and the cosmos come into being, and in Genesis 2, God is the one who kneels down and fashions a human being out of mud, then leans over and breathes life into him. The God of the Bible is both larger than we can imagine and nearer than we realize, and as paradoxical as those two statements sound, we must hold tightly to both.

You see, if we forget either half, we end up with nothing. If we limit ourselves to the transcendent God beyond description – for instance, by dismissing as “primitive” or “unscientific” all concrete examples of God acting in history – then we end up with Deism, a belief in a distant and functionally useless God who set the machinery of the universe in motion and is now just impassively watching the wheels turn. On the other hand, others have a private God, one who is beside them in every decision, cares about their every feeling, helps them find parking places, and hangs on their every word – but who is not the God beyond our naming who won’t submit to our management. Those people end up with God who is all about them: not a God so much as a therapy pet, who puts them at the center of the universe. We have to hold on to both Gods, recognizing that they are two sides of the same mystery. We need to be able to sing “My Best Friend is Jesus,” but we must also be able to sing “Immortal, Invisible” and “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

It’s not easy to hold these two sides of God in suspension, and no one does it perfectly, but you know who has done it best? The Jews. On the one hand, they have held the name of God sacred. The reason we don’t know exactly how to pronounce God’s four-letter name YHWH is because thousands of years ago they stopped saying it, or even writing out all the letters. All we have are the consonants. When reading scripture aloud, Jewish liturgists don’t even try to pronounce God’s name, but just say “Lord” or just “the Name.” Centuries of Jewish mysticism has centered on the contemplation of the inexpressible mystery of God’s unspoken name. At the same time, though, no one reveres God’s physical work in history more than the Jewish people. Their Passover Seder is an annual retelling the story of the Exodus in detail. In the nearly 2,000 years since the temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world, they have not been absorbed by the majority cultures among whom they have lived. They have maintained their distinctive rituals, their distinctive diet, their traditions of God’s saving works among them. In Judaism, God is both beyond personality and very, very personal.

By the way, I think it’s this ability to hold in balance the God of the Cosmos with the God of their people that explains one of the distinctives of Judaism. They believe in one God – they sort of started that particular trend – and yet they don’t proselytize. They don’t feel it their duty to persuade others to believe as they do. This is because while they definitely believe that God has chosen the Jewish people, they don’t believe that they are the only people that God is working with. They don’t believe that their distinctive experience of God, which they guard so jealously in their tradition, is all that God is. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi for Great Britain, puts it this way: “Number one: the God of Judaism is the God of the whole world. But, number two, the faith of Judaism is not the faith of all the world. It never was intended to be” (“Faith Lectures: The Concept of a Chosen People,” rabbisacks.org). Their conviction is that if God is too mysterious for us make images of, or even to confine to a single name, God is surely too big to be the sole possession of one group of worshipers.

So these first two weeks of our sermon series on the Exodus we’ve explored what the Exodus story can teach us about the nature of God. Last week, we defined God as the one who hears the cry of the oppressed, and this week we encountered the God who is too large to be confined to our physical and intellectual limits, but at the same time acts in physical, intimate ways in history. Next week, we’ll start looking at what the Exodus story can teach us about ourselves. That may take a while, too.