

What is God's Name?

The story of Moses and the burning bush has been significant in the history of the Abrahamic religions for at least a couple of reasons. For one thing, it provides us with some powerful imagery for the presence of God and our appropriate reaction to God's presence. It is fundamental to our understanding of the holy. The passage also gives us foundational insight into the very nature of our God. This morning, I want to pursue how we view those concepts, celebrate them and, perhaps, turn them on their heads a bit. As we progress, keep in mind the questions, "what is holy? How do we respond to being on holy ground? How do we understand being in the presence of God? How do our names for God influence all of the above?" But first, a brief excursus.

As the lectionary leapfrogs through what its creators obviously assumed were familiar stories, I think it's always appropriate to take just a little time to catch up on the action that they omit. For some of us, it may have been a long time since we've heard or read these stories from the Bible. I know how dangerous it is for me to rely on my memory, so I try not to make the same demands on anyone else. And it's often the case that there are important plot or thematic points in the skipped verses. Without reference to them, the lectionary passage is harder to understand. So, I hope that you all don't mind too much when I take a few moments, as I will today, to fill in the gaps.

In chapter two of Exodus, we learn that although Moses grew up in the Egyptian court as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he knew full well that he was actually a Hebrew by birth. As he reached manhood, his sense of the injustice of the Hebrews' plight must have become acute. Scripture tells us that one day he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by his Egyptian taskmaster and, thinking no one was watching, he killed the slave master and buried him in the sand. The next day, he saw two Hebrew men fighting and attempted to break up the fight. One of the antagonists retorted, "Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian?" and Moses realized that his secret was out. Soon, he was under a death sentence from his adopted grandfather and fled to Midian to save his own skin.

In Midian, Moses met some girls at a well (now doesn't that sound familiar) and helped them water their flock. Before long, he was married to one of them, Zipporah, and in charge of the flocks of his father-in-law, whose name is given as Reuel in chapter two and as Jethro in later chapters. Moses and Zipporah have a son, whom he names Gershom, meaning "a stranger there," because, says Moses, "I have been a stranger in a strange land." I'll bet some of you thought Robert Heinlein or Leon Russell invented that phrase.

We're also told at the end of chapter two that Moses' adoptive grandfather, the Pharaoh, dies, leaving the throne, no doubt, to a young man with whom Moses would have grown up at court. But Moses' uncle and possible playmate is even harder on the slaves than his father. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." Now, the scene is properly set for the story from this morning's lectionary.

When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, we are told that two things happen. First, God tells him not to come too close but to remove his shoes on holy ground. Second, "Moses hid his

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face, for he was afraid to look at God.” How does this part of the story influence how we understand God and the Holy? Let's think for a moment about the encounters with God we remember from our recent studies in Genesis. On the one hand, we have read of a God who walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, who spoke face to face with Abraham and teased Sarah, who restrained the awesome power of God and wrestled with Jacob. On the other hand, we know that Adam and Eve's immediate reaction after the incident of forbidden fruit was to hide themselves from God, that God is known to Jacob as “the Fear of Isaac,” and that Jacob is apparently astonished to have had such an unmediated encounter with God – “Jacob called the place (where they wrestled) Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”” In later scriptures, we may recall that Moses is continually warned that he cannot look upon God's face and that for later prophets who encounter God in dreams and visions, the figure of God is obscured. As we sang a little earlier, “the splendor of light hideth thee.”

We are reminded by all this that in the case of God, the Holy (h-o-l-y) is wholly other (w-h-o-l-l-y other), completely different from us by an order of magnitude we cannot fathom. It is for this reason that the writer of Hebrews wrote, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The created cannot fully understand the Creator, can never really come close, and we often fear that which we do not understand. Many mystics who have been blessed with an immediate experience of God report both a sense of God's unconditional love and God's immeasurable power. It has gone out of fashion to talk about “the fear of the Lord” and I think in many ways that is a good thing. It is far, far better in these often frightening times to focus on the love that God extends to all. But I also wish we were more comfortable talking about the fear of the Lord, for no other word, it seems to me, whether it be awe or respect or any other word, quite captures that sense of how different God is from us, of how amazing God's power is and how amazing it is that God should take note, not just of God's creation in general but of each one of us in particular. And not just take note, but consider and know and love us in our particularity, becoming personally open to us, welcoming each of us as God's beloved. More on that in a moment.

Our sense of God as Holy and wholly other also impacts our understanding of certain places and things that we call holy, the things set apart for God. God said to Moses, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” We affirmed this place, this small room of brick and wood, as holy ground in song this morning. We refer to this space as a sanctuary, a holy place set aside for worship. We're pretty casual in our worship style here at Good Shepherd. We do not, for example, remove our shoes when we enter this space as our Muslim brothers and sisters do when they enter a mosque. We don't, as some churches do, prohibit the ubiquitous coffee cup from accompanying a worshipper through the doors of this room (although I wonder if we'd change that habit if we got new carpet?). But I'll bet that there are unspoken expectations about what's permissible in this room and what's not. I suspect that the line is different for many of us and that some of us might be surprised where the line would be drawn by others or even by ourselves. But there is a sense in all of us, I think, that this is holy ground.

But here's a slightly different take on that subject. There is another reason, perhaps, why God told Moses to remove his sandals. Traditionally, in Middle Eastern and other cultures, there is another time when one removes one's shoes. It is when one is at home or visiting another's

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home. It is one of the ultimate signs of hospitality. Those who've seen the St. John's Bible in Tacoma over the last few weeks (and if you haven't gone, by the way, you've still got one more week) may remember that one of the illustrations is of Jesus' words to the Pharisee in Luke 7: "I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she (referring to the sinful woman) wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair." As a child, I watched the TV show, "The Beverly Hillbillies," with great delight because my grandparents, after all, were real hillbillies, from the rugged foothills of the Ozarks, just as country as the Clampetts but far less naïve. Do you remember the final lines of the closing song? "Set a spell, Take your shoes off. Y'all come back now, y'hear?" That, my Yankee friends, is real Southern hospitality and it's not the same as asking folks to take off their shoes so they don't grind pine needles into your carpet.

In the view of Dennis Olson, Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, hospitality is what God was extending to the expatriated Moses. Olson writes, "removing his sandals has a second significance in light of Moses' earlier self-declaration in Exodus 2:22: "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land." The Hebrews had rejected Moses as one of their own. The Egyptian Pharaoh sought to kill him. The Midianites see Moses as a foreigner, "an Egyptian". Moses is not fully "home" in any human community. Taking off one's sandals is a gesture in many traditional cultures that is associated with entering not only a worship space but also a home. Thus, here at the foot of the mountain of God, Moses the "alien," has at last found a true "home. Moses finds his true home not with humans but with God, the God of his ancestors, "the God of Abraham...of Isaac...of Jacob." God is the true home for us, as well. As Augustine wrote, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Just as with Moses, God welcomes us into relationship, calls us to be at home in the Kingdom of God, God's Beloved Community.

Let us turn now to the matter of the name (or names) of God. Moses wants to be able to tell the Hebrews to whom God is sending him just who it is for whom he is acting. It probably seems like a pretty simple request to us. We are used to the idea, in business or in societal interchange of being able to say, "So-and-so sent me." But it was a little different in the time of Moses. To know someone's name was to have power over him, or at least understand his very being. You may remember that Jacob's wrestling antagonist flatly refuses to give the patriarch his name, choosing instead to claim authority over Jacob by giving him a new name. So it should come as no surprise to us that God, whom we can neither control nor fully understand, gives Moses an answer that is less than easily understood. "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.'"

The answer is mysterious, further clouded by millennia of reticence about the use of this name. Ancient Hebrew was written without vowels, so we cannot tell from the written tradition of Torah how the name was pronounced. Scholars believe that the pronunciation of the name God revealed to Moses slowly became restricted to use at the Temple and that when the Temple was destroyed, all knowledge of the pronunciation of the name was lost. In regular speech and writing, the Jews came to use the term "the Lord," "Adonai," out of respect for God and even referring simply to "ha-shem," "the Name." The name Jehovah, which was once common but is now mostly found in hymns, was created by combining the four consonants of the Hebrew from this verse, sometimes called the Tetragrammaton, with the vowels from Adonai. The reconstruction "Yahweh" is now the preferred solution to the puzzle of pronunciation, though

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observant Jews are still extremely sparing in their use of the name. As the move away from gender specific or authoritarian language has become more accepted, so, too, has been the use by Christians of the name Yahweh. For my part, I must confess, I sometimes feel that we are too free with this name that has been so carefully protected over the millennia and so, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, I still often find it more appropriate to say "Lord," even though I recognize the difficulties this may engender for some. Like so many things in our respectful communal spiritual life, we must understand and appreciate each other's differing positions on this subject.

But the problem of pronunciation is ultimately far less important than the problem of meaning. What does this oblique answer from God tell us about God's nature? Who is the Creator that we worship? The name Yahweh and God's first answer to Moses, "I am what I am," are both built around variations of the Hebrew verb meaning "to be." There have been nearly as many suggested solutions as there have been scholars to suggest. Some that I have read include: "He who causes to be what comes into existence," "God who creates the heavenly host," "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE," "I am because I am," and "I will become whatsoever I please." Robert Linthicum writes, "The actual Hebrew word, has more of a causal sense to it – that is, that God is always in a process of becoming – that is that God is always moving ahead, ahead of his people, to bring them into the next step that they need to take to become what God intends them to be. God is always becoming savior, liberator, healer, covenant maker, redeemer to God's people; God is always one step ahead of them in the future. So a better translation of that name would be "I become what I become" or "I will cause to be what is caused to be" or "I will be what I will be". You can't pin God down!" The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber has suggested "I am who will certainly be with you." In the context of this encounter with Moses and indeed of our whole Bible, both Old and New Testament, this is an answer that resonates deeply with me.

Consider for a moment a couple of other things God says to Moses at the burning bush. At the end of our passage is this pronouncement: "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 forever, and this my title for all generations." God was known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God was present and involved in their lives. In our multi-cultural context, which includes member of all three Abrahamic faiths, I think we could add "the God of Ishmael," to the list which God gives Moses. Remember, after all, how Ishmael got his name, "God hears me." Earlier in this passage, echoing the words at the end of Chapter two, God told Moses, "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, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians." God sees and God hears. And more than that, God comes down.

That, it seems to me, is the ultimate answer to the question that Moses asked, to the question that so many people ask or want to ask of God: "Who are you? What are you like?" Yes, God is Holy, set apart and other than us. Yes, Yahweh is beyond our comprehension. But God sees us and God hears our cries. And God will certainly be with us. Whether it is in the burning bush that drew Moses' attention or in the cloud by day and the fire at night that led the Children of Israel to the Promised Land, or in the tent that was pitched in the midst of their camp, God wants to be with us. There is a bit of rabbinic wisdom about the burning bush and why it was not consumed, phrased (of course) in a question and answer. Q: Why was the bush burning but not consumed? A: Because the Lord was waiting for Moses to notice it. God does not force

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Godself upon humankind; God waits patiently, burning but not destroying, until we are ready to notice. And so, in the ultimate act of God becoming Emmanuel, God With Us, God did not become an Emperor or a King or even a wealthy man. God became the son of a humble carpenter, born in questionable circumstances, raised in a tiny village. We call him Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

So, what is holy? If we take this passage to heart, it is seeing and hearing our brothers and sisters in distress, wherever they may be and going down to them. How do we respond to being on holy ground? By knowing that we are home in God and inviting others to kick off their shoes and join us. What is God's name? There are so many: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Fairest Lord Jesus, Healer of All Nations, the list goes on and on. But perhaps the final answer is the one adopted by the Children of Israel so long ago – Our God is the Lord, Lord of my life. God is the one to whom we say, even if we are as reluctant as Moses, “Here I am, Lord. I will go, Lord, where you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”