

BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH September 3, 2023

“WHAT’S IN A NAME”

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Text: Exodus 3:1-15

God’s Word: Matthew 16:21-28

Exodus 3:1-15 (NLT)

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro,[a] the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai,[b] the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn’t burn up. 3 “This is amazing,” Moses said to himself. “Why isn’t that bush burning up? I must go see it.”

4 When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, “Moses! Moses!” “Here I am!” Moses replied. 5 “Do not come any closer,” the Lord warned. “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. 6 I am the God of your father[c]—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the Lord told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. 9 Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. 10 Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.” 11 But Moses protested to God, “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?” 12 God answered, “I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain.” 13 But Moses protested, “If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?” 14 God replied to Moses, “I am who I am.[d] Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you.” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh,[e] 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 eternal name, my name to remember for all generations.

When we first meet someone what is the first question we usually ask: What's your name? Over the past couple of months of our family has done their share of introducing ourselves. As we've got to know one another, I've been trying to remember all your names and I apologize as it has been hard to remember all your names, but you have been so gracious and helpful to remind me when I cannot remember. But "what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." For those English majors and drama aficionados in the room you probably recognize this line from "Romeo and Juliet." Juliet is referencing her forbidden love with Romeo because of the feud between the Montagues and Capulets. Names are important and can "carry deep personal, cultural, familial, and historical connections. They also give us a sense of who we are, the communities in which we belong, and our place in the world." But we also know that it's not a name that defines a person but a person that defines the name. That's what Shakespeare is getting at in the dialogue of Juliet talking about Romeo.

I think in our passage this morning we can see both the significance of God's name but also God's characteristics that cannot be defined by a name. Both God's name and his characteristics give us insight into who God is. Yet there is still an element of the unknown or other worldly with God as we can see in the story too. It begins with this supernatural event where a bush is on fire but not burning up. This is how he gets Moses' attention. I don't know about you but that would probably get my attention too. It's almost Harry potter-esque. But God chooses to reveal himself in a real way to Moses, calling him out by name. God knows your name too and I'm sure that there are some ways God has reached out to you may be like Moses in a supernatural way or it may have been in an everyday ordinary occurrence.

What was your reaction to those moments when God called you or when God gave you a sign? First off Moses answered. He heard God calling him and answered with the very Old Testament answer, Here I am! But God reminds Moses this isn't some ordinary interaction, but God is something other, otherworldly, and so God requests Moses remove his sandals because God has made the very ordinary place where he was standing holy. Then God proceeds to tell Moses who he is..."I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses cowers in fear, covering his face because he knows God is powerful. As God continues to speak to Moses, we can hear God's heart for his creation, his people. God sees the oppression, hears the cries of distress, and is aware of suffering. What does this say about God's attributes? I think it means that God cares! God sees you in good times and bad and wants to be there with you in times of hurt and pain, celebration and joy, and everything in between. God sees, hears, and is aware of all. That means that God sees YOU, God hears YOU, and is Aware of All YOU are going through! This is who God is!

Not only that, but God also "come down to rescue" his people. God is not only aware, but God does something about it! In this instance we see how God fights for the Israelite people and empowers Moses to lead the people out of slavery to the promised land. God is the one who rescues, the one who comes down,

the one who fights on our behalf, and is the one who provides for our needs. "I have come down," (are) words that anticipate the ultimate coming down of the One who emptied himself and became obedient unto death on a cross." The one who is Promised Messiah to rescue us from ourselves and our sin, take the punishment of our sin, and to provide a way to reconciled to God. We do this through our confession that Jesus is Lord of our lives, as Pastor Becky reminded us of last week. "God has come down from his throne above the heavens "to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land..." Salvation is not only from; it is also to. It is not only freedom from bondage; it is also freedom for flourishing. Hell will be overcome; heaven will be enjoyed."

Yet we see that God's way of working in history probably isn't how we as humans want it to go. "Yes, there are occasional flashes of naked power (as in the Ten Plagues), but an unrelenting display of divine power will destroy humanity (as suggested by Moses covering his eyes when he realized that he was looking straight at God in a little burning bush). Instead, God stoops to conquer, using a man (who isn't unlike us) who isn't very excited about his role in the project.

So begins Moses' effort to talk his way out of God's plan. He raises objection after objection, beginning with this humble question that leads to the soaring revelation of God's real name. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses isn't a nobody... He's got some weight and power when it comes to the Egyptians. He grew up in the palace as quasi-adopted royalty after he was floated down a river. He's got connections and knowledge unique to him alone. Yet now he's a shepherd in a faraway land after running after committing the heinous crime against an Egyptian. Moses though still is hesitant to this call upon his life even after God has revealed Godself to him. But "God responds not with an affirmation of Moses' ability as people do today ("you can be anything you want to be!"), but with a promise about God's presence. "I will be with you." The success of your mission depends not on your ability and power, but on my constant presence with you."

Moses is still not convinced and is still trying to get out of a tough mission even though the God of the universe appeared before him in a burning bush, even though God shared God's heart, even though God says, "it's not about your own abilities but mine, even though God says, "I will be with you." I can imagine this is where Moses is searching for another way out, another question to procrastinate the inevitable. This is not unlike my children who try and procrastinate their chores. "So, say I agree to this plan, who should I say sent me? What name should I tell all these people sent me to lead them out of Egypt?"

"God's answer is as important as his promise to deliver his people. He tells them the name by which they are to call upon God for the rest of history. Tell them, 'I am what I am,' 'I will be what I will be,' or Yahweh. God answers with his personal name! But what's in this name is that God isn't defined by what humans can say or think about God. No, God simply is, not something humanity can create, no God is "self-existent,

independent, sovereign, beyond the control of any other power." Also, it indicates that "God has no equal. God is eternal and unchanging. I AM is the sense that God is "the becoming one"; God becomes whatever is lacking in our time of need... God is the becoming one, becoming what we need."

God's (proper) name is both an announcement and an introduction. It announces God's presence, and invites any interested to know Him by experience, to taste and see that the LORD is good. In essence God is saying, "I can be whatever I can be, but on the other hand, the name indicates that God is known through God's actions for others." The God of the universe, I AM, Yahweh, binds Godself with promises and covenants to real human beings, who like humans do, constantly mess up and disappoint. In God's answer, the heart of Moses question and reluctance is addressed. Moses is procrastinating the inevitable, he didn't really want a proper name but assurance that God will deliver on God's promise to be with him. God identifies himself as the God of these real folks, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is known not only by his name but through his people. And through God's people we see that God is a promise keeper even when humanity doesn't keep their end of the agreement. That means we can count on God to keep his promises.

Ultimately, God answers Moses like Jesus answers Peter in our passage from Matthew this morning by saying, "Don't put me in a box, because I'm beyond anything you can conceive." Maybe God is saying to Moses and us, "You can't really know me unless you walk and go with me. "You can't really know who God is unless you're willing to sign on for God's mission in the world." Which is what Moses ultimately does, going to Egypt, confronting Pharaoh, leading his people out of Egypt, taking them through the parted waters and into the wilderness. And there, on the other side of things, Moses doesn't need to ask for God's name anymore, as he learned it firsthand, through his own experience, and so is ready to sing of what he has discovered.

Moses has learned who God is, you see, only by following God on the path God set for him and thereby learning first-hand the nature, purpose, and truth of this God. And the thing is, this doesn't stop — or even begin — with Moses. It was true of his ancestors — Abraham taking off for a new land in his old age; Jacob fleeing God in every which way only to be called by God to sire a nation. And it will be true of his descendants, as well, from Old Testament prophet and priest to New Testament disciple and missionary," even to us today. To know God, you have to go with God. Faith is a full contact, participation sport. You just can't sit back and expect to really know God, you have to get up off the couch and get in the game, take a risk, try something marvelous, reach for something you thought unachievable, step out onto the winding road the end of which you can't see from your doorstep." It's not just a name but a relationship.