

“WHY ME?”

Exodus 3: 1-10

May 8, 2011

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“The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3: 9-10)

When we last left the story of Moses, he was tending his father-in-law’s sheep in Midian. He was married and had three sons and was content. So content was he, in fact, that he stayed there, in that life, for forty years.

But it was not Moses’ destiny to be a shepherd. At least not a shepherd of sheep.

THE BURNING BUSH

The Midianites with whom Moses had cast his lot were a wandering, nomadic, shepherding people. They usually followed their sheep to wherever the free grazing took them. Generally, the shepherd would sort of follow the sheep and the family would follow the shepherd.

So it was that Moses followed his sheep to Mount Horeb which was known by the locals as “The Mountain of God” or “Mountain of the Gods,” depending on the theology of who was doing the talking.

There is some confusion and disagreement among scholars about this particular mountain but most agree that Horeb and Sinai are, in fact, the same mountain called different names by different people. So we will return to this mountain later in the story. By that time the name will be changed to Sinai and it will be here that Moses will receive the Ten Commandments.

But for now, all he gets is a burning bush. That is, a bush that is aflame but not consumed by fire.

If this is not the most famous scene from the Cecil B. DeMille movie, it is certainly the most famous line and it is spoken by God. In 2004 we learned that the voice of God was actually that of Charlton Heston, distorted by special sound effects. And you, will recall, the line is this: “Moses! Moses!”

Moses, not knowing who is speaking to him responds with a common ritual response: “Here am I.”

After telling Moses to take off his shoes because he’s standing on holy ground, God identifies himself: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” And Moses accepts this and hides his face, afraid that he might accidentally see God’s face and die.

God then tells Moses that he has seen the suffering of the Israelites and heard their cries. He says that he has “come down” to deliver them out of Egypt to a “good and broad land, a land of milk and honey” which is currently occupied by – and here follows a list of all the occupants of what, today, is Palestine: the Canaanites, the the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

God then ends his presentation by repeating why he’s doing this: He has both heard the cry of the Israelites and he has seen how the Egyptians oppress them.

Then comes the calling of Moses which comes as a sort of nonchalant, matter-of-fact ending to the scene: “So come, I will send you up to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

See, right up to this point, Moses was probably thinking, “Well, that’s really nice but why are you sharing all this with me?” But then, in the last sentence, God lowers the boom. “So, let’s go. I need you to take care of all this for me.”

WHY ME?

Now, what follows is a dialogue between Moses and God that is a sort of Q and A.

Moses raises objections and problems with God’s plan and God knocks those objections down with solutions and answers.

But hidden at the very beginning of this dialogue is an event that looks kind of small and insignificant and even a little hard to understand when we first read it but is, in fact, one of the most important events in the Bible, a mile stone in the history of Judaism and Christianity. It is an event that stands as a quantum shift in the way people relate to God.

Watch...

Moses says 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?”

Do you hear that? Do you understand what is being said, here?

Moses does not know God’s name. And neither do the people, Israel. They know that there is a God, one God, who created and runs the universe and who has, from time to time, involved himself in their lives – in the life of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob and of Joseph. But that God was a distant and impersonal God, detached and objective in the way he relates to his creation. If he had a name it was so great and so much above human existence that it was unknowable and unsayable.

When Moses asks for God’s name he is not just asking for information, he is asking for God to change the way he relates to his creation. Moses is saying, “If you are going to do this, if you are going to ask the people to trust you and

wait for you to act, and to do as you say, if you are going to expect me to do all that, then you have to get off your high horse and come down here and be in an intimate relationship with us. You're going to have to, at the very least, tell us your name."

Remember when you weren't allowed to call your teachers by their first names? Even if you knew their first name and called them that behind their back, you didn't dare do it to their face.

Jim Thomas, my favorite, English teacher was Mr. Thomas. Earl "Rudy" Rudisell, who was everyone's favorite social studies teacher was Mr. Rudisell. The guy that the football players referred to as Fat Dave behind his back was Coach Hearst to his face. And Jack Wagner, the band director who everyone spoke of as "Jack," was Mr. Wagner.

We may have known their names but we dared not use them. It would have been a sign of, well, not disrespect so much as a lack of proper respect. It would have been too intimate, too familiar. That's how names sometimes function, as symbols of relationships.

Some people have a gift for remembering names. I do not. Some pastors have disciplined themselves in some memory exercise so they can remember the names of every person who comes through the line and shakes their hand and know it the following week or month or whenever that person happens to come back to church. Or, even more amazingly, they remember the name when they see the person three weeks later at the grocery store or the county fair.

Me, I have to hear your name ten times, see it written down five times, and come to your house at least twice and then hope Jean is standing next to me to remind me of the name the following Sunday. I have to really, really work at it. (Unless your name happens to be Dean. I usually remember that.)

I remember one time when I made myself pause and remember the name of a little boy who came through the line with his parents. I had heard that children are often afraid of or intimidated by adults because they are so big, so if you want to relate to a child it is better to stoop or get down on your knees so you're at the same level that they are at.

So when this particular little boy came through the line I stooped down and asked him his name which he told me in a very proud and articulate way. We shook hands and I said to myself, now you have to remember his name. If you're going to remember the name of anyone in that family, remember his.

And I did.

Thankfully, he and his parents were there the next Sunday and, when they came through the line I stooped down and shook his hand and greeted him by name. And as he walked away I heard him say to his mother, "He knows me!" What he was really saying was, "I'm important. I matter to him. I'm somebody, here. He knows my name."

Remember this?

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.

Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,

and they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see,

our troubles are all the same

You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

Yeah, that's the theme song for "Cheers" a fictional bar. But wouldn't it be great if it was the theme song – or one of the theme songs – for the church? I mean, that's not even radical hospitality. It's just plain, old, ordinary, run of the mill, hospitality where we make an effort to know the names of the people we worship with. That's why we're making such an effort with these name tags – so we can know each other's names.

By doing so, we say, "You're important. You matter to us. You're somebody here."

It says that ours is not a distant, formal relationship. It's a close, friendly, familiar, intimate relationship.

And that's the kind of relationship that Moses is asking from God.

Tell me your name. Please. Open yourself to me. Let me know you as a friend.

And, wonder of wonder, God says, "Okay."

God says, "I am Yahweh." It translates clumsily into English. "I am who I am." But the name, Yahweh, actually means, in Hebrew, "I am." When God identifies himself by name his name says all that there is to say. Once it is established that God is, there is, really nothing left to say. God is self-defining. God is all inclusive, the highest superlative, the greatest great, the realest real, goodest good.

He tells Moses his name: Yahweh. And, if we are reading this aloud we simply must take a very long pause and drink in the power of this moment. God has revealed God's name. He has reached out his hand and touched the cheek of his creation with a gentle caress and said, in a whisper, I think: "I am Yahweh."

And with that everything has changed.

No longer is he the God of our ancestors. He is our God. Not just our shepherd but our friend. Not just our rock and our fortress but our father, too. And our mother who takes us under his wing and shelters us from the storm.

He is not just God, grand and impersonal. He is...Yahweh.

And, when that has sunk in, he says, “Say this to the Israelites: ‘Yahweh sent me to you.’ And say this, as well: ‘Yahweh (the text renders it THE LORD in small capital letters, but the Hebrew word is actually Yahweh.) Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’”

In other words, tell them that the God who has guided your tribe for the past thousand years has finally revealed his name to you and held out his hand to you. The God who created all that is wants to be in a close and intimate relationship with you. He wants to call you by name and have you call him by name.

THE MAN WITH A PLAN

Once that is established – and a grand establishment it is – then all that is left is for God to share with Moses his plan for bringing the Israelites out of bondage.

From verse 16 – 22 God lays out his plan and tells Moses to share it with the Israelites. See, the intimacy of this new relationship is already being worked out. God isn’t just going to act. He’s going to share his intentions with his people. He’s going to solicit their cooperation in the plan.

And, basically, the plan looks like this:

Moses will go gather all the elders from the Israelites and go, all of them, before Pharaoh and ask him to give them three days off so they can go into the desert to worship their God. He won’t do it, of course, until he has to.

So, says Yahweh, I will pound him until he relents and lets you go. In fact, I will pound him until he begs you to go. No, until he pays you to go. And then, after you have left Egypt I will lead you to a land of milk and honey, the land of the Canaanites, etc. etc. So, what do you think? Does that sound like a plan or what?

Moses still has a couple of questions, however.

Like, what if the Israelites don’t believe me? What if they say, “God spoke to you? Yeah, right. Fat chance.”

Yahweh responds by giving him three little mini-miracles to perform that will increase his credibility quotient. First he tells him to throw down his staff and, when he does, it turns into a snake. When he pick it up by the tail it turns back into a staff. Pretty nifty.

Then he tells him to put his hand in his pocket and pull it back out and when he does it is leprous and white, the skin dead. When he puts it back into his pocket and pulls it out again, it’s perfectly healthy. If that doesn’t convince them, says Yahweh, take a cup of water from the Nile River and pour it on the ground and it will turn into blood – human blood, we assume.

There, that should wrap things up, right?

Well, not quite. Moses has one more little issue. He’s not a good public speaker. He describes himself as “slow of tongue.” Scholars tell us that it might mean he stutters or stammers. Or it might mean that he doesn’t think quickly on his feet and prefers to think about things before he talks. Or it might mean that he, like 99 percent of all people is really, really uncomfortable in public speaking situations – tends to get stage fright, clam up, freeze and get that deer-in-the-headlights stare thing. Not pretty.

Whatever it means, Yahweh isn’t buying any of it. In fact, we can hear a little impatience making its way into his voice by now: “Uh, excuse me. I forget. Who is it that invented speech? Who is it that came up with the whole concept of language and made people able to talk and hear and understand...or not hear and not understand, as the case may be? Oh, wait, that was ME! Now, let’s get going. I’ll tell you what to say and when to say it.”

And, finally, Moses just comes out with the truth: “Please, I’d rather not do this. Can’t you just send someone else?”

Yahweh, ever patient but still a little miffed, strikes a deal. “Okay, fine. Here’s what we’ll do. Your brother, Aaron is a pretty fair public speaker. Has that nice, John Carradine baritone voice and good diction. The whole thing. And, right now, as we speak, he’s on his way here, looking for you. He’ll be your mouthpiece. I’ll tell you, you tell him, he’ll tell the people...or Pharaoh...whatever.

“Now, let’s get going.” And, I love this last line of the conversation. “Don’t forget your staff.”

Moses returned to his father-in-law, Jethro, and said, “I need to go back to Egypt and see if my relatives are still alive.” Jethro gave him his okay and Moses loaded up his wife and sons and all his belongings and headed back to Egypt with the staff God had blessed in his hand.

EQUIPPING THE CALLED

You’ve probably heard the old axiom: “God does not call the equipped. God equips the called.”

Nowhere was this more true than with Moses – plucked from the water, raised by a doting mother and then by a doting stepmother. A child of privilege who came of age in the palace. Something of a slacker when compared to the other Hebrews in Egypt. A murderer and fugitive. A shepherd who was perfectly content to live out his life as an employee of his father-in-law, a pagan priest of Midian.

But Yahweh, the God who lets us call him by name, had other plans for him. In fact, it has been argued, God needed him.

If things were going to go the way Yahweh had in mind, he needed a human agent to make them happen and Moses was that human agent.

Does it shock you to think that God occasionally needs people? Does it surprise you to hear that God may very well need you to do his bidding, to be his hands, his mouth, his face?

Does it challenge you to realize that you may be the only image of God that some people ever see?

It shocked, surprised and challenged Moses.

Are we so different?

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Moses is content in Midian. He's comfortable. What's the danger of contentment and comfort for the People of God?
2. I was at a meeting a few years ago with about 500 other ministers. Bishop Ogh was leading the meeting and, in the course of things, I had a question or comment. I don't remember which. What I really remember was that the bishop looked across the room, over those heads and called on me by name. As someone who has tried to keep a relatively low profile at the conference level I was surprised, and not a little alarmed that he knew my name.

Can you remember a time when you were shocked that someone knew your name? Pleased? Worried?

3. The name "Dean" can mean "a leader of ten" in Old English or "teacher" in Latin. What does your name mean? Was that an important consideration when your parents chose your name? Do you know the story of how you were named? Are you willing to share it? How has your name shaped who you are?
4. What do you think of the notion that God might, from time to time, need people?