

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.³ So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵ “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”⁶ Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹² And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

¹³ Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation. (Exodus 3:1-15)

What is God’s Name?

Do names really matter? There’s a member of our church here – someone who’s in church pretty much every Sunday. His name is Bill. For some reason, I keep calling him Paul. And he keeps answering to it! My guess is that if I stay here long enough, nobody’s going to be sure what his name really is. He’s taken it with good grace. But he has a right to expect that his pastor would learn his actual name. So do the rest of you. I have to confess, I’m still struggling with names. I still don’t know the names of many of you who are here regularly. That’s embarrassing after almost a full year of serving as your pastor, but it’s true. Names do matter. This morning, God emphasizes how important it is that we know his name when he says, **“This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.”** But what’s he talking about exactly? **What is God’s name?**

I.

That’s what we want to understand this morning. In this chapter of Exodus, God revealed his name. **God’s name is “I AM WHO I AM.”** God revealed that name the very first time he spoke to Moses. Moses was born in Egypt and raised as the grandson of the king of Egypt. But Moses was an Israelite. It appears that his real mother taught him who he was and he never forgot it. As an adult, he went to the defense of a Hebrew slave and killed an Egyptian who was beating him. But his people did not welcome their new champion. Worse, the new king found out about it and tried to kill Moses. So he fled Egypt. He got married and started a new life taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert.

One day when Moses was looking for pasture near Mt. Sinai, he saw a bush on fire. But the fire was not consuming the bush. When he went to get a better look, God called to him from the fire. He told him to go back to Egypt because God was going to use him to rescue his people. So Moses asked what God’s name was. The question was a part of longer conversation in which Moses tried to weasel out of the assignment God was

giving him. Moses asked, **“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”**

The name we’re talking about is usually written as “the LORD” with all capital letters. Sometimes it’s written as Jehovah, but a more accurate way of saying it is probably Yahweh. This is God’s personal name. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the ancestors of Moses, did know this name. The Bible records them hearing it and even using it. Had the people forgotten it? No. But Moses needed to be sure that he could answer the question. If someone came claiming to represent their God, the Israelites were going to want to know that he really did. Asking God’s name would be the easiest way to check that. Does that mean that Moses didn’t know God’s name? Most likely he did. But the way God answers the question seems to indicate that Moses did not understand what the name meant. God says, **“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”** In Hebrew, God is telling Moses that this name the LORD or Jehovah or Yahweh really means “I AM.”

Most of the time when we say “I am,” that’s not a whole sentence. We usually say, “I am a pastor or a truck driver or a nurse.” We say, “I am happy or sad or frustrated.” God’s name means “I am.” I am what? “I am who I am.” Think about it for a moment. What is God? You can’t really explain it. We call him a person, but he’s not a human being. God is what he is. I can’t define him by anything that I know here because God is not a part of creation. So he merely says, “I am who I am.” And you and I will never grasp all that he means.

But we can say some things about him. “I am who I am” means that he always was and he always will be. God is eternal. He has no ending and no beginning. Unlike us, God exists independently of anything else. You and I need all kinds of things to continue to exist, to live. We need oxygen or our existence will come to a very quick end. We need water and food and shelter. We’re dependent on each other and on the things this world provides to sustain our lives. But God depends on nothing. And all that exists depends on him. The sun won’t shine without God. Oxygen won’t keep us alive unless God makes the rules of physics and chemistry and biology work. “I AM WHO I AM” makes this universe what it is.

The God who calls himself “I am” does whatever he chooses to do. His will is the definition of what is right and holy. God doesn’t ask our permission to end our lives. He’s God. If he determines that today is the last day of my life or the last day of the life of my child, he’s God. All that he does is right and holy, even if I don’t understand it. “I am who I am” is true to himself. All that he does reflects what he is. Our Lutheran teachers like to say that this name means he is the God of full and faithful love. God is love. His love never changes or ends. His love does not depend on us earning it. God loves us before we do anything lovable. God loves us when we’re ugly and sinful in our words and our actions. God makes promises based on his love, and those promises never fail. Because his name “the LORD” means all that, God told his people to remember that name from generation to generation. That is still the work of the church today. It is still the most basic job of a parent: to teach our children the name of God.

II.

“The LORD” is not a generic name that we can use for all the ideas of God that are out there. Our society likes to believe that all religions worship the same God under different names. But that’s not true. This name only applies to the one true God. But at the same time, there is a great deal more to knowing God’s name than just this one name. The Bible uses many different names for God. And in the Bible, the concept of God’s name implies more than this group of sounds. **God’s name is all that he reveals about himself.**

I’m sure that you all know people who have the same name. When we named our daughter Hannah, we thought we were being really clever and unique. We had no idea that name had suddenly become popular. We now know lots of Hannahs, although one in particular will always be extra special to us. Last weekend, I noticed that one of the new pastors graduating from our seminary has the same first name I do. He even spells it the same way. But I’m pretty confident that my wife will be able to tell us apart. Why? Because when you think of a person by their name, you think of much more as well. When I think of my daughter Hannah and then I think of any of the other Hannahs we know, I don’t just think of the sounds that make up their names. I think of the people they are. Their characters. What I know of their histories. All of that is part of their name in my mind and heart. The same is true for God. His name is all that he tells us about himself.

In the story of the burning bush, God reveals who he is. God told Moses, **“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”** Taking off your sandals was a sign of respect. Moses was a shepherd; you can imagine what he stepped in on a regular basis. Moses was standing on holy ground. But

what made it holy? Was that place more sacred to God than any other? Not really. That spot was holy because the LORD was there. God is holy. So the place where he chooses to reveal himself is holy. Moses reacted in a very typical way: he hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. That's the practical result of God's holiness. It underlines our sin. Think back to when you were in school. Think of that kid who always did everything right. He or she got straight A's. They never got in trouble. How did that person make you feel? They always made me feel jealous because next to them, you couldn't miss my shortcomings. Well, imagine standing next to God! Who's going to make you look worse? He's totally holy. In the Bible, when sinners come into his presence, they're terrified because it's not possible to deny their sin any more.

We live in a society that tells us that we're basically good. Our concept of being sinners is kind of like having a ladder that's too short. You climb up it and you can almost reach whatever it is you're trying to get, but you come up a little short. So, Jesus gives us a boost or a taller ladder, so we can be good enough for God. That's not at all what God teaches us. We are not basically good. We don't just come up a little short. God is perfect in his holiness and we're perfect too: perfectly sinful and perfectly worthless. Nothing we do even comes close. In fact, we've fallen off the ladder into a pit and we can't even reach the bottom rung.

That holy God punishes sin. God was going to make the Egyptians pay for their sins against Israel. Then he was going to wipe out the Canaanite tribes in the land of Israel and the Bible is emphatic in saying he would do that because of their sins. God still punishes sinners. Death and hell are the punishment we deserve and God hands that punishment out every single day.

But that holy and perfect God chooses to love us. God chose to hide himself in a burning bush and call Moses and reveal his name to him. God chose to hide himself in the fetus of a child in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God chose to come down to this world and become one of us – a real human being. God who upholds everything became a baby who needed his parents to feed him and clothe him and keep him warm. God who has always existed chose to begin a human life when the Holy Spirit came on the Virgin Mary and caused her to conceive. Jesus was born and he lived a perfect life in our place. Then he died to pay for all that sin that we are guilty of. He paid for all the times that we tried to weasel out of our responsibilities, just like Moses did. He paid for the sin that makes us so thoroughly and totally offensive to God that we deserve death and hell. Jesus suffered death and hell in our place. Then he rose from the dead to give us eternal life. When God came down to send Moses to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt, he was already teaching how he would come down in the person of Jesus Christ and deliver all people from slavery to sin and to death and to hell.

God taught us more about his love, more about what his name means. He said to Moses, **“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.”** God knew what was going on. He had heard the prayers of his people begging him for deliverance. God cared about the pain his people were suffering. So he was coming to rescue them. God still knows what is going on in our lives. It's easy for us to feel like no one knows or cares what I'm going through. But God always knows. He hears our prayers when we beg him for relief. He cares about our pain. Sometimes, we have to go through it. Sometimes we need that pain. But he never sends it lightly. He knows how much we suffer and he cares very deeply about that.

So he only sends the hurts we need. He is coming to rescue us all. Sometimes, that rescue takes the form of a person like Moses coming and bailing us out. Sometimes, that rescue takes the form of hearing the gospel so that we have the strength to endure pain and hardship. Sometimes, that rescue means that we leave this world of pain and sorrow and we join him in heaven. The final rescue will be when Jesus returns on the last day and frees us from all sin and sorrow. But God knows and he cares and he is coming in response to our prayers.

That is the God we worship. That is what his name means. In the months to come, I hope that I get a much better handle on all of your names. In fact, don't be shy about telling me your name on Sundays after church. Make me learn it! But understand this: God already knows your name. He will never forget it. Because he loves you, he has taught you his name. Cling to the LORD, the God of full and faithful love, the God who came in the person of Jesus Christ to give us eternal life. Amen.