



***The God We Can Know:
“KNOWING THE GREAT I AM!”***

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Scripture: Exodus 3:1-14

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, “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, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

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.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

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?” 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.’”

In one of the television episodes of *MASH*, a disoriented pilot who believes he is Christ is brought to the 4077. The program revolves around the reactions of the medical staff to this man. In the final scene, Corporal Radar O'Reilly wants to say goodbye as the man is loaded on a van for Tokyo. Radar is a naive Iowa farm boy thrown in the middle of the more sophisticated *MASH* medical personnel.

Radar says to the pilot, “Captain Jesus, sir! Before you go, would you give my friend a blessing?” The captain replies, “Sure, Radar,” and Radar hands him his teddy bear. As they begin to pull the pilot’s cot away, Radar again asks, “And Captain Jesus, sir! Would you give me a blessing?” The pilot responds, “Sure, Radar,” and reaches out to touch Radar’s head. Radar quietly suggests, “Not Radar, sir. My name is Walter.”

‘Radar’ is a nickname. The corporal’s real name is Walter O’Reilly. Names are key in our story from Exodus 3. And, as Radar knew, one’s real name is the key to our real identity.

And our true identity is that we are children of God. It’s very easy for all of us to forget that there’s more to life than just this human plane, isn’t it? I mean, we get so caught up in our work and our families, our controversies, our anxieties, and the troubles of those around us and in all the stresses of life, that we lose sight of anything more, anything beyond, anything greater. And once we forget that we are beloved children of God, it’s not long until all of life becomes an impossible mess!

Moses was a man with whom God spoke. When Moses saw the burning bush, he knew that it was God, and so he turned aside to listen. In fact, Moses and God were having a very intense heart-to-heart conversation here in chapter three. In our scripture Moses found God in a burning bush that did not burn up. At the time Moses was 80 years old and a shepherd in the land of Midian. And Moses responded to this sign from God by turning aside.

Here in chapter three we find what has been called “the call of Moses.” In the Old Testament, when a great leader was called by God, the sequence of events followed a standard form. The call of Gideon, Isaiah and Jeremiah followed the same pattern. When a person was called by God, the first thing that happened was a divine appearance by God. In this case God appeared in a burning bush. Then God spoke an “Introductory Word” – who God was and why God was calling this particular person. After that came the Commission, namely, what this person was to do for God. We find this in verse ten of chapter three where God says to Moses, “So, come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

After that come all the Objections that this person has to being called. In verse 11 Moses says, “But who am I to go to Pharaoh?” Then in verse 13 he says, “But if I go, and the Israelites ask who sent me, what am I to say?” And in the following chapter Moses continues the objections by saying, “But what if they don’t listen to me?” And then one more objection, “But Lord, I am not eloquent, I’m not a good public speaker.” All of these are the type of objections a lot of ministers have cried out to God when they have felt called into the ministry. Have you ever tried to raise objections to God when you’ve felt called by God to do something?

We have a divine appearance, the introductory word, the commission and the objections. In the classic sequence of a biblical call, the fifth element, then, was God’s Response to the person’s objections and God’s reassurance that everything would be OK. And we find it in the famous words of verse 12: God replied to Moses, “I will be with you.” Then, finally, God would always give a Sign that this person was truly called for a certain task. In the case of Moses, God said this in verse 12, “And this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you – namely, when have brought your people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this same mountain, Mt. Sinai.”

Today we are in the midst of this amazing conversation between Moses and God! God has called Moses, but Moses is not ready to accept God's call! He has questions and concerns and objections. He's been away from Egypt for forty years! He was raised in the Pharaoh's household! So most of the Hebrews didn't even know Moses! Naturally, he was concerned about his credibility.

So he says to God, "Look, if I come to the Israelites and say, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and if they ask me in return, 'Well, what is his name,' what shall I answer them? What is your name?" To ancient peoples, names defined a person. Moses wanted to know who this God was and what this God was like.

And now we're getting to the heart of this passage: God's character and God's name! Who Is This God? In order to understand what happens next, we need to realize that there are three different names for God used in this particular passage.

When Moses says, "If I come to the Israelites and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me,'" he is using the word Elohim for God. Elohim is actually plural, unique to Hebrew thinking, first used in Genesis 1:1. But it was sort of a generic word for God, for many other peoples in this part of the world had a similar word for God. The Ugarits called their God "El," and the Babylonians called their God "Elu." The Ugarits even had a more specific name for their God, "Ba-el," or "Baal," as we know it.

Today the Muslims call their God "Allah" in Arabic. All these names for God are derived from that root word "El." If you have ever traveled in the Middle East or Africa, or watched any newscasts, you have no doubt heard the native people there going "Elelelelel..." They are *trilling* the name of God in praise and thanksgiving.

For hundreds of years the Israelites called their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "Elohim." In fact, whenever you see the word "God" in the Old Testament, it's a translation of the generic word "Elohim."

Moses understood this. He lived in a polytheistic environment, where people worshiped many different gods. Thus, he wanted to know the specific identity of the God who called him. "If my people come to me," Moses said, "and want to know who this God is who will deliver them from the Egyptians, what shall I say. Which God are you? What is your name?"

The first name for God was Elohim. The second name for God found throughout the Old Testament is Yahweh, YHWH, or as it is translated in our Bible, LORD, with capital letters. This word, Yahweh, or LORD, is used whenever God's personal relationship with his people is stressed! This is the name God gave to Moses for the first time at the burning bush. Although Yahweh is used in Genesis, this revelation of the nature and character of God did not come until Moses. In Exodus 6, God tells Moses that he did not reveal himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Yahweh. They all called God "Elohim."

But here Moses learns that God's name is really "Yahweh." In other words, the Israelites do not have a generic God. They have a special God whose name is Yahweh. So we're getting more

particular about God. The word Yahweh occurs more than 7,000 times in the Old Testament. Why don't we use that word Yahweh today? Well, after Old Testament times, the word Yahweh was translated as "Adonai," which in turn was translated into the Latin word "Kyrios," which means Lord. So wherever you see LORD with capital letters it means Yahweh. When you read "The LORD is my shepherd" in Psalm 23, the word is Yahweh. And wherever you simply see the word "God" in the Old Testament it refers to Elohim. *OK?*

So we have learned about two words for God, Elohim and Yahweh. But there's one more significant phrase. When Moses asks, "What is your name? What shall I tell people?" God then says to Moses, "ehyeh asher ehyeh," which is variously translated as "I AM who I AM" or "I shall be who I shall be." Then he says to Moses, "Tell them I AM has sent me to you."

But what does this phrase mean? Our version translates the phrase as "I am who I am." Others have said it could be "I will be who I will be," "I will be who I am," or "I shall be who I shall be." But "ehyeh" can be read as an active tense. One Old Testament scholar caught the essence of this phrase, I think, when he translated it as "I am the God who will be there." Another goes even further to say it means "I am the God who will be there for you." And about 25 years ago the Jewish rabbinical association published a commentary which translates it "I am the one who will be whatever the future means."

So I think this passage not only tells us that God *is*, it's also saying that God is present for us, and that God faithfully will be God for us forever. The name is an Assurance that no matter what we do, God will always be our God and will act on our behalf.

Rev. Rob Fuquay, author of our Lenten Study *The God We Can Know*, quotes Everett Fox's commentary on Exodus suggesting that God is saying to Moses "I will be there howsoever I will be there." He suggests that God is saying "You need me more than power and ability. I will be there! Let that be enough!" Don't worry about how you shall speak, or having the right words, or whether the people know you: "I will be there for you!" Don't worry about how Pharaoh is going to act: "I will be there for you!"

I think the key question for us this morning is how do you name God? How do you understand God? Do you know that the very nature of this God is to always be there for you?" If you don't, then how do you understand God? By what name is God known to you? If you don't know that by this promise God is named, then do you really know God at all?

The name of our God is, then, both a description and a promise! And we will learn more about that promise in the coming weeks as we hear how Jesus describes himself as the great "I AM!"

If a key question for us is: Do you know that God will always be there for you? Then there is a second question: Do you know your true name, your true identity? How do you name yourself in relationship to God?

Sue Monk Kidd is one of my favorite devotional writers. Sue says:

I never did like my first name. It was so common, so plain. Other girls who were friends of mine as I was growing up, had such wonderful names and Sue seemed so plain to me. It was made even worse for me when I got to college and found that the roommate who had been assigned to me had a first name of Star. Of all things, her first name was Star! Whenever we were introduced to anybody the guys focused on the one named Star! One day we were introduced to one particularly handsome young man who remarked three times in the first two minutes, “Star, what a wonderful name! Star, what a beautiful name! Star, what an unusually wonderful name!” I was named “Sue,” she said.

I hated my name. It seemed so plain, so unimaginative, until one Christmas, when my grandmother came to visit us for Christmas, and as she hugged me I said, “Grandmother, where did your parents ever get the name of Sue?” because I knew my parents had named me after my grandmother.

And my grandmother seemed to understand, in a moment, and she said to me, “It sounds like a plain name, doesn’t it? But when I was a young girl and not very happy about being named ‘Sue,’ my mother told me that she and my father had chosen it because it came from a biblical word that is translated into English as ‘Lily.’ And that when they read the teachings of our Lord, he said, ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. I tell you not even King Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these.’ And when we looked into this tiny bed, into the eyes of our first daughter, we just felt that she had to be named ‘Sue,’ the lily of the field, more beautiful than King Solomon in all his glory.”

And Sue Kidd wrote, “Since that day I’ve been a little prouder of my name. I have felt that this is a very special name if, in fact, my mother and father looked and saw something beautiful, something wonderful, something they could love, and gave me a name which meant the most beautiful of all.”

Moses learned that the name at the heart of God is that God will be there for you. And what we learn from Jesus Christ is that the truest name of God is love. And if you know you are a child of God, a beloved of God, then you’ve received the most beautiful name – and identity – of all.

May we pray? Elohim, Yahweh, ehieh asher ehieh, God who will be God for us, grant that we might come to know that you are our God, and we are your creatures, and that you will never let us go!

‘Tis Love! ‘Tis Love! Thou diedst for me.
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
pure Universal Love thou art:
To me, to all, thy mercies move – thy nature and thy name is love.
To me, to all, thy mercies move – thy nature and thy name is love. Amen.