

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Starter

Exodus 3:13-18

Because he cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.
When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will rescue him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him,
and show him my salvation.

(Psalm 91:14-16, RSV)

What's in a name? Ask a salesperson, and s/he will tell you how important to sales it is to learn and remember people's names. Names and faces, are they not the two recognizable features of individuals we all wish we could recall better? "I know your face, but I just can't come up with your name," we say, hoping the person will be gracious enough to supply her/his first and last names and say something helpful such as, "We met six years ago at the such-and-such conference." Better yet, the person might even relieve the awkwardness by saying, "I'm So-and-so, and I know your face but not your name, as well. I think we may have met at the"

The name represents the person; it is not only personal property but an extension of the self. Where the name is honored, the person is honored; where the name is abused, the person is mistreated and dishonored. Jesus taught his followers to pray to God, "May your name be held holy" ("Hallowed be Thy name").

A name also grants access which, I suppose, is the reason we sometimes value our anonymity. We want to be left alone, without intrusion by strangers into our personal business. The old "Cheers" TV show opened with a song that said, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name." Sometimes you may also want to be in the privacy of a place where nobody knows your name. When I left central New Jersey for four years of school in a small college in a small town in western Pennsylvania, I discovered immediately that people there were quite friendly. Other students I didn't know, of both genders, greeted me and smiled when we passed each other on campus. Soon enough I learned that everybody also seemed to know an awful lot about everybody else and to be quite interested in each other's business. The loss of my metropolitan New York area anonymity had its pluses and minuses.

"A prophet," Jesus says, "is not without honor, except in his hometown." A name grants people a degree of intimacy but also opens the door of the private, personal self to intrusion. True intimacy is grounded in respect and so maintains its sense of wonder, but the fake intimacy of mere

familiarity can breed disrespect and an off-hand sense of knowing “all about” another person. “She doesn’t impress me; I knew her when.”

In the thought of ancient Israel, as with other ancient peoples, a person’s name represented that person even more strongly than is true in our culture. A man wanted a son to preserve his name “in the land of the living,” and a people or tribe bore the name of its god. Because much of ancient religion (as still today) was magical in its thought and practice, the name of the god was useful in conjuring or gaining access. The real purpose of an idol or physical representation of the god was to grant access to the worshiper. Only the most naive thought the little statue actually was the god or goddess; the idol represented the presence of the god and so, in a sense, became that presence. To bow before the statue was to bow before the god. Knowing the god’s name gave the worshiper a form of control over the god’s presence and access to the god’s favor also afforded by the idol and enhanced by proper forms of either worship or conjuring. Sometimes the line between worship and magic is very thin.

Anything that represents God’s presence and favor in a way people can access can become an idol – including any ritual or sacrament, the Bible, and even the name of Jesus. Intimacy without respect, without the necessary sense of wonder, becomes trespassing. I often cringe inwardly at contemporary Christianity’s various expressions of, “I’ve got Jesus.” Our present passage from Exodus 3 presents us with God’s balance of granting access and even intimacy to Moses and Israel without allowing any conjuring, control, or trespassing. Being too sure of the other person is trespassing in our intimate human relationships; it certainly is trespassing in our relationship with God.

Young women these days (and young men as well sometimes) need to be cautious about their sense of giving themselves to the latest boyfriend (or girlfriend). “You’re mine” is a very dangerous statement for the one so claimed, so possessed, so owned, and often so controlled. Yet, there is a respectful and loving intimacy that also says, in a different way, “You are mine, my very own.” In the latter, the desire is to belong with, not to control and manipulate. What passes for intimacy in boy and girlfriend relationships is too often a matter of power over the other one who is not treated or respected as a friend at all; it’s more a matter of, “Look what I can make you do.”

Moses very quickly discovers that with God there will be for him no, “Look what I can make you do.” That lesson is crucial for the leader who will soon be called upon to demonstrate the power of this strange God who loves slaves. Representing this God must never go to Moses’ head. He must feel the responsibility being laid upon him but must not thrill to the sense of power he gains from holding that staff in his hand. Jesus asks his disciples, “Do you rejoice that the demons obey you? Rejoice rather than your names are written in heaven.” That second part means, not that they have a guaranteed spot in paradise when they die (as we might interpret it), but that they are known personally, by name, to God.

Within contemporary Christianity, especially as it departs from the established churches in the murky but exciting realm of charismatic Christian leaders accountable to no one but themselves

and into a Christian movement that has no tradition but is driven by pop Christian culture and its music, the temptations to idolatry are very close to hand and quite powerful. Crowd control and manipulation have become prominent features of the Christian experience. It's amazing to the observer how the supposedly personal experience of Jesus is depersonalized in the sameness of swaying to catchy tunes and the loss of thought in an orgy of emotion. Praise with minimal content. Experience without reflection in reaction against doctrine that offered no experience of God's presence and love. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus" until his name becomes a mantra. Praise as escape from the pressures of contemporary life. Just let it flow through you. Let it happen. Feel safe, feel loved, feel released. The parallels with ancient Baal worship are alarming. For the worshipers in various ancient religions, the emotional experiences could substitute for and sometimes connect with sex and drugs; for the leaders, the goals could be wealth and power. So it seems to have been in the ancient Baal worship of the Canaanites that seduced the Israelites in the 8th Century B.C. So, I wonder, is it sometimes in contemporary Christianity? We might ask ourselves what traditional Christianity has lacked that has led so many of our young and not-so-young into this movement that is replacing the churches. What needs are being filled and sometimes exploited, what needs have been left unmet by the traditional or mainline churches? These questions might make good discussion starters for our Visioning Team as well as for all of us.

Now, we go back to Exodus 3 and the giving of God's name to Moses and, through him, to Israel. The first time I wrote this discussion starter I did not post it because it became so technical and complex it seemed to me more a discussion stopper. So, let me try to distill what could be a very long and boring analysis.

First, God gives a name which God alone can speak truly. It is a name in the first person, translated usually as either, "I Am Who I Am," or "I Will Be (with you) Who I Will Be (with you)." That latter translation is put forward by Martin Buber, and it has the biblical advantage of keeping our attention on the relationship God is establishing with Moses and Israel and on the promise, "I will be with you," rather than on philosophical considerations of God's being or existence that might come from "I Am." In the Bible, the message is never merely that God is or that God exists, but always that God loves, redeems, and makes covenants with the people.

In our ordination vows, we say of the Bible that we accept it, Old Testament and New, as "by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal and God's word to (us)." The phrase "by the Holy Spirit" is crucial. It keeps the truth of the Bible in God's hands rather than in ours, so the Bible does not become, as it would in our hands, an idol. God's truth belongs always and only to God. Whenever I read the Bible, for myself or for the congregation, I must bear in mind that I am being given something but can never take possession of it. It always speaks to us and to me, and it always speaks in God's way. If I make it speak in my way, as though it were given to me to say what I want it to say and for my purposes, then I am trespassing on holy ground.

Because God's truth is always redeeming love, the Bible can be used rightly only by those who commit themselves to the service of others in Jesus' way of humility and self-giving. Anything

else is idolatrous and makes the Bible speak, no longer God's truth, by some human being's falsehood. For a sense of the worthlessness of biblical knowledge and "correct" beliefs without love, read I Corinthians, chapter 13.

"I will be with you who I will be with you." In a much lesser sense, that is the way of human love and intimacy also, when respect and wonder are preserved in the relationship: belonging without ownership, commitment without possession, promise without guarantee. Moses and Israel will walk with God because and only because God has promised to walk with them.

But Israel still needs some name by which to address God. A name spoken by God in the first person, "I," maintains God's freedom within the relationship of redeeming love, but it does not give the people a name by which to address God in prayer or speak of their God with each other. So, we read here of a second (and secondary) giving of the name in the third person: Yahweh or Yahveh.

Here matters get even more technical. Hebrew is written mostly in consonants with the vowel sounds understood. When Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language and became a religious language only, the worshipers and worship leaders needed help knowing what vowel sounds to add. Think of my name as rchrd sndll. How would you pronounce it if you did not already know? I might be Ruchardi Sandulilo for all people hundreds of years from now might guess. To provide the needed help, vowel points were added to the Hebrew text.

But, in time, the Jews came to regard God's name as too holy to pronounce, and the correct pronunciation was lost. What about those vowel points? Unfortunately, they are no help but only misled Christians into mispronouncing the name as Jehovah. Why? They are the vowel points for a different word, one that means "My Lord." Remember, God's name was not to be pronounced anymore. So, the reader had to say something. Instead of speaking the name, the reader said, "My Lord," only in Hebrew. The mispronunciation Jehovah combines the consonants YHVH (the "J" is German, hence pronounced as our "Y") with the vowels for "My Lord" in Hebrew.

Today, the best guesses for pronouncing the name (still much debated) are Yahweh or Yahveh, probably with the accent on the second syllable, although that too is debated. Many biblical scholars use the name in their works rather than the substitutes in all capital letters, LORD or GOD. The latter is used in most of our English bibles when the phrase in Hebrew means "The Lord Yahweh," because "the Lord the LORD" sounds silly. The Jerusalem Bible and its update, the New Jerusalem Bible, use Yahweh.

Why use the name Yahweh? For biblical scholars, using it clarifies meanings and makes better sense of contrasts such as those between Yahweh and Baal, since "Baal" means lord, master, or owner. In passages such as one we are now studying from Exodus 3, the use of the name Yahweh lets the reader know what is going on, whereas using "the LORD" only adds to the confusion. Certain other passages in the Old Testament become clearer for the student when the name Yahweh is used. Psalm 8: "Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth." Or Psalm 110:

“Yahweh said to my Lord (the king or, by projection, the Messiah), ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

I rarely use the name Yahweh in preaching or worship both because it causes confusion and because it is being abused in certain circles in our society. Instead of intimacy, it communicates strangeness. So, I use it only for clarification and go years without using it in our services at all. In teaching, however, I use it regularly with confirmation classes and adults. I disagree with the idea that “the universality of the Christian God” should prohibit its use (see the introduction to the Revised Standard Version). For us, truth is covenantal, not universal. It is the truth of love, not being. All gods are not our God simply called by different names. Consider that the most prominently worshiped gods on earth are wealth, power, pride, and prestige. We need to know the particular God we worship and serve, the God who loves us and calls us to newness of life, the God who confronts us with the truth of redeeming love in our crucified Messiah. We serve the God who promises to be with us but who can never be possessed or controlled but only trusted and loved.

We do well, I think, to notice and consider that, as soon as God gives Moses the two forms of God’s name, the conversation returns to the business at hand, which is the liberation of the slaves from Egypt and their constitution in covenant as Yahweh’s own beloved people. Read verses 16-18 again and see that what Yahweh God wants the Israelites to know is divine grace, love, mercy, and deliverance and not any secrets of divine being.

Suggestions for Discussion:

1. First of all, what do you make of all this about God’s name, God’s freedom, God’s desire for intimacy in covenant with Israel, and God’s insistence upon not being used?
2. Are the parallels with human relationships helpful to our understandings of those human relationships? What are the dangers of intimacy? How do we balance our need to belong with our need to be free? Are my terms *respect* and *wonder* helpful? Can you add to them or to the whole discussion of human relationships?
3. What have traditional or mainline Christian churches failed to offer people that many seem to be finding in the “evangelical movement”? What can we do in our own ways to meet the needs without simply copying the movement badly?
4. What are the strengths and what are the dangers in a Christianity without boundaries or mutual accountability beyond popular appeal? Is it enough to say simply, “If it names Jesus and brings them in, then it must be good”?
5. “The Bible says what I say it says. If you like my story and feel good when you hear me, then follow me.” How much of contemporary Christianity in America does that describe? Where and how is it an unfair characterization?
6. Think about contemporary or traditional Christianity and magic. What do you see happening?
7. Does this discussion help us understand the Ten Commandments’ prohibition of carved images to represent Yahweh? Can we state the prohibition in contemporary terms?