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Title: Something of God

Date: September 3, 2017

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Text: [Exodus 3:1-15](#)

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What is your mental image of Moses? If you come from my generation, you likely picture a movie character who looks a lot like Charlton Heston standing before a giant body of water raising his arms, a staff in one hand and commanding the water of the Red Sea to part giving the Israelites safe passage from the pursuing Egyptians

who are hot on their trail. It is a wonderful image of a bigger-than-life Moses but that picture of Moses doesn't come until much later in the book of Exodus.

Today's scripture is ten chapters earlier than that dramatic scene but, in some ways, it is just as dramatic. Moses is out tending the sheep that belong to his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian when he goes outside the normal boundaries and finds himself at the base of a mountain.

But even that is getting ahead of the story. To fully understand either today's story or the story of Moses at the Red Sea, it is important to remind ourselves who Moses really is – who is the Moses that we don't usually pull up in our imagination? The Cliffs Notes version goes a little something like this.

Moses is standing around, observes a fight and kills an Egyptian. This is not someone that doesn't count. Moses had killed another human being – he is a murderer. He is a murderer who tried to cover his crime by stuffing the body in the sand so nobody will find out and he is on the run. He is a fugitive. He leaves Egypt and flees to Midian to hide out. He changes his profession and his identity. He becomes a shepherd. No one will find him there, he believes. There is nothing attractive about his new job as a shepherd but he is alive.

This Moses that we encounter today should be pictured as dirty and sweaty and with the odor of sheep. Can you smell it? If you've been around sheep any at all, they are not clean animals because of the wool they carry around.

Pigs get a bad rap because, in my limited experience, sheep are much dirtier animals than pigs. Moses finds himself and the sheep he is caring for in a place that scripture describes as "beyond the wilderness." I think that phrase "beyond the wilderness" likely describes both his physical location and his emotional and spiritual location – he is "beyond the wilderness." He is up to his ankles in sheep muck. There is nothing that appears holy about this place except – EXCEPT – that God is there.

Not only is God there but God wants to engage Moses in conversation. This encounter starts out as pretty much a standard encounter with God. There is a spectacle – a burning bush that is not consumed – a spectacle that catches the attention of Moses even though he didn't want to look. And then, the voice of God hits even closer. Once Moses had rationalized that the burning bush must not be for him - must be meant for someone else, God calls Moses by name not once but twice, just in case there was any question – "Moses, Moses!"

"Come no closer," God says, and then, "take off your sandals for the place you are standing is holy ground." Shedding ones shoes is a symbol of humility. In many cultures, removing ones shoes is something that is done when you enter a home. Moses, the murderer turned sheep-herder who had to believe that he should be running away from God rather than toward God, finds himself taking off his shoes, honoring God and finding a home in God for this fugitive that had no place to call home.

Then, God makes a promise and asks for Moses to help bring that promise to fruition. "I will deliver my people from the Egyptians but you, Moses, have to go to Pharaoh and to the Israelites – you have to be my feet on the ground in this work." Then comes the words from Moses that all of us have when we sense that God is asking us to do something that is out of our comfort zone.

We find excuses, we give well-thought out reasons, and we make up things to get us out of what God wants us to do. "I'll get back to you, I've got a family to raise, we're in sports right now, can't you call someone else, is there something that has a little less work to it, I'm really not a people person."

Moses had five excuses after God asks for his help. They don't all show up in today's reading but he uses them all. The first one is simply, "Who am I?" It's as if Moses wants to confirm that God knows who God is talking to – "you know you're talking to Moses, right? I'm a little busy right now running for my life, hiding from the people who want to kill me." But God was sure. Secondly, Moses pleaded a lack of knowledge in that he didn't even know

enough to do this – how in the world would he have any credentials with the Israelites. The third excuse was that he, Moses, didn't have the power to do anything quite as bold as this. The fourth excuse had to do with him lacking speaking and leadership abilities.

I think the last excuse that Moses uses is the best and perhaps the most honest. "I just don't want to do it." In the fourth chapter, Moses basically tells God that he's not interested and to go ask someone else. This strikes me as a little gutsy of Moses after all God had done for him. This is the same Moses, you'll remember, that God rescued as he was floating in a basket in the river as a baby.

After listening to all the excuses, God assures Moses, that Moses can, indeed, do the task asked of him and that God will be with him. But Moses has more questions, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and tell them all this great news and they don't believe it and they ask who is this God who sent me. What do I tell them then? What if they want to know your name?"

In the Old and New Testament, the meaning of the name gave a clue to the character of the person. The name becomes a message. The name of Moses is a great example. In Hebrew, it means "pulled out" and Moses was pulled out of the Nile River as a baby and Moses was to pull the people out of slavery. Take Joshua. His name meant "savior" and Joshua was to save the people. And the name Jesus is the same root word as Joshua. Jesus – "savior" became the savior of our sins. Simon's name had to be changed to Peter when it became clear that he would be the "rock" on which Jesus would build the church.

What is the meaning of the name and what message does it communicate? Our names have meaning. It's not as big of a deal in our time as Old Testament times but we still name children after ancestors or sports figures or Biblical characters. My mother told me she found the name Ryan in a baby book and liked it but if you look it up, Ryan means "Little King." I sort of like that and I would like you all to treat me according to my name. After Kyle's week, I might suggest the Kyle means "pastor who forgot to unplug the coffee pots and almost burned down the church and then forgot to turn off the water and almost flooded the church." You'll have to ask him for details.

So, then, knowing God's name seemed to be important, especially in that culture. There is only one time in the Bible, only one time in this library of sixty-six books with 1184 chapters that we hear the story of how God revealed his name and it's here in the third chapter of Exodus.

If Moses can get God's name, Moses will have some power, some credentials. It's hard to tell if Moses was trying to trick God to reveal identity or if he really did want this so he could move ahead with the task before him. Either way, God's answer is perfect: "I AM WHO I AM!"

There it is – God's name. Well, sort of. We could have an hour-long Bible study explaining the origins and meanings of this name that God has slyly given to Moses. At the risk of losing everyone and getting too deep in the weeds, let me do a two-minute linguistic lesson.

It may be helpful, if you are a visual person, to write these letters in the white space of your bulletin. Imagine or write this – "J" with a blank space. "H" with a blank space. "V" with a blank space and then the letter "H." So four letters, J-H-V-H with a blank space in between. It may not look like it but that is the word, "Jehovah." I know, I know – "Vanna, I'd like to buy a vowel." In the Hebrew language there are no vowels. That would make Wheel of Fortune so much harder wouldn't it? So let's put in vowels. After the letter, "J," insert the vowel "E." After the letter "H," insert the vowel "O." After the letter "V," put the vowel "A." When you put three vowels into this word, you get what we recognize as "Jehovah." In Greek with the added vowels, it becomes YAHWEH.

There are three more words I want you to remember in this linguistic lesson – all two-letter words – "AM," "BE" and "IS." As we talk about the meaning of names, the meaning of the name YAHWEH is the "BE" verb in the Hebrew vocabulary. That's right – a verb – an action word. Over time, the name Yahweh became so sacred that nobody could say it. You were not allowed to say God's name in the Old Testament. And so every time the ancient Jews came across the name Jehovah or Yahweh, the Jews always said the word, "Adonai." For ancient Jews to say the name, Jehovah or Yahweh, was to curse God so they substituted "Adonai." The Hebrew word, Adonai, was translated into English as LORD. So every time you see the word, "Lord," in the Old Testament, it is really the word, Yahweh. The ancient Jews called God, Lord, but God's secret name they couldn't or didn't say was Yahweh. 1¹

When you get to the New Testament, the name means "I AM" much like we read it today. Seven times, in slightly different ways, Jesus uses this name that God first used with Moses, to describe himself. I AM the bread of life; I AM the good shepherd; I AM the light of the world; I AM the living water; I AM the way, the truth and the life; I AM the resurrection and the life. And then Jesus said something that got him killed. Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I AM. And the Jews around him cried out, "Blasphemy. You are making yourself equal with God." It was true. Jesus was recognizing God in him in a special way when he used the words, "I AM."

Why is that name given to Moses so important? To have a personal relationship with someone, you need to know their name and use their name often. Their personal name and use of the name reveals your relationship with them. So it is with God. We are to know God's name and use God's name often. We are to know God's name and use it often in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. That is why God wanted us to know God's name so that we could have a relationship with God.

Second, we know God's name is holy. We do not appreciate it when people around us use God's name in vain. When we hear foul language and the name of God or Christ being defamed, we cringe inside. We want the person to stop. We teach our children to not desecrate God's name because we know God's name is holy.

But thirdly, we need to know the meaning of God's name. We need to know the message of God's original name. AM. BE. IS. God is saying, "I am the ground of all existence. I am the ground of all being." That has a mystery to it as well. You cannot hold God down. You cannot box God into categories. God is mysterious. God says, "I am." You cannot box God in any place because God is. God is the ground of being. God is existence. God is. I am who I am. God's name is wonderfully and mysteriously philosophical. AM. BE. IS.

You cannot lock God into "I am father." You cannot lock God into "I am mother." You cannot lock God into anything because God is the ground that all that is. God is action, movement. God is moving throughout the universe. God is never stationary. God is never still. God is energy itself. God is forever on the move because God is movement. God is a BE verb. God is entire flexibility. I will be father. I will be mother. I will be son. I will be daughter. I will be anything I want to be.

I will be anything you need. If you are thirsty, I am water. If you are starving, I am food. If you are all alone, I am friend. If you are an orphan, I am your father. If you are weak, I am strong. If you are afraid of death, I am eternal life. No matter what you need, I am all things for you. I am. I am. I am. I am with you. I am in you. I am for you. I am everything you need, I am. I am. I am. For that is the secret name of God, the secret that is true.

Holiness doesn't depend on the condition of the place nor the condition of the person. Holiness, to be hallowed, depends on the presence of God. That's why this church -- and it doesn't matter whether you use the word "church" to mean the building or the people -- isn't necessarily holy on its

own. What makes it holy is the presence of God. For Moses, he was standing on holy ground not because he was at the base of a mountain or because some bush was burning. Moses was on holy ground because God was there. Same with that little stable in Bethlehem; what made it holy was the presence of God at the birth of a child. That's why a crucifixion can be something through which salvation is offered. What's holy is not the timbers, the nails, or the spectators. What's holy is God's presence in the event.

There is something of God in your life right now. You are standing on holy ground because God is in you and you know God's name. There is something of God that is reaching into your life to draw you even closer to God. God is able to refute every excuse you can come up with for being faithful and serving. Allow God to be bigger than you can imagine. Find God in the moments of your life that you deem to be smelly and stinky because you know God's name and your life is holy because God is there.

¹ Olson, Dennis, Charles T. Haley Professor of Old Testament Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Commentary on Exodus 3:1-15 from August 31, 2008 found at www.workingpreacher.org.