

Proper 17A: Exodus 3.1-15

September 3, 2023

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I'm not quite sure how "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah" came to be sung at funerals in our family, but it did. We sang it at Grandma Springfield's service in the spring of 2000, and again, much more unexpectedly, just six weeks later at my uncle Stewart's.

On a cold January day eleven years ago we buried my mother from the John Brown University chapel. As the service closed, my brother Kirk and I picked up the old pine box Dad had refinished, which now contained Mom's ashes, and our extended family processed out of the church as the congregation sang "When I tread the verge of Jordan, Bid my anxious fears subside; Death of death and hell's destruction, Land me safe on Canaan's side..." We walked on with the ashes, across University Street, into Oak Hill Cemetery where we dug a hole in the frozen earth and committed her body to the ground.

Almost exactly ten years later, we opened the service for my father with the very same hymn in the very same chapel, just as he wanted. And, while Ardelle knows this already, I might as tell you that I fully expect y'all to sing me to the far side of the Jordan with that hymn when my time comes as well.

We will not be singing "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah" today, by the way, for several reasons. One of them is that Milton prints the orders of service on Thursday, and this was one of those weeks when I didn't get a word of this sermon written down until yesterday morning. And, while worshiping in this hall for a few months may have lent an air of informality to our liturgy, Kristin hasn't started taking hymn requests during the service. Not yet.

But I've begun with this little diversion into my family's history with a hymn, firstly as a reminder of how songs and stories are not limited to the meanings their authors pack into them in at their creation. They take on infinitely more meaning as they get told and sung by other voices, from the midst of other lives, in other times and other places. Meaning gets added like the growth rings of a tree as we pass songs and stories between us.

The same is true of every word in a living language, in a way, especially the words we call names. You are not your name. Your name gets filled up with who you are in the imaginations of those who know you over the course of your life with them, wouldn't you agree? In a very real sense, there's no such thing as a Jemar or a Julie. But there are living humans who will turn aside and listen when we speak those names out loud.

Yes, in a minute or two we will note that the same is true of the elusive name of God. But there's another reason I brought up the particular hymn I did. Do you know the history of the name Jehovah?

Well, the name God spoke to Moses at Horeb is particularly sacred to Jews. So sacred that some Jews believe it should never be uttered at all. Most scholars agree that the name would have been pronounced "Yah-weh". But there were no vowels in ancient Hebrew. It wasn't until six centuries or so after a Jew named Jesus lived that scribes known as the Masoretes invented Hebrew vowels and began adding them to the Biblical texts so future generations would know how their forbears spoke. But the Masoretes didn't want someone to be reading along one day and accidentally pronounce the name of God out loud, so they mixed up the vowels. They literally took the vowels from "Adonai," an entirely different word, which is usually translated "Lord," and put those vowels between the consonants of Yahweh. Guess what you get when you do that? You get a name that, in English, sounds something like Jehovah.

This curious etymology makes me love "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah" all the more. The grand old hymn uses a nonsense name for God, which may be the most faithful thing any God-addresser can do. Because all names for God are nonsense names, even the most holy ones. No name is sufficient to the mystery of God, just as your name does not explain the mystery of you. Names are only useful as means of connection and communication. They mean nothing until we begin passing them between us and trying to make sense of our lives and our world together.

Jehovah is not the name Moses heard at the burning bush. But it seems like God was playing with Moses in the exchange. Moses asks for the divine name and hears "I am who I am." Robert Alter says a better translation is probably "I will be who I will be." Either way this sounds like an ancient version of Abbot and Costello's "Who's on first" routine. And maybe that's exactly what it was. Everyone is confused, because we should always remember that the name of God is

inadequate. Jews were wise enough to embed this confusion not only in the story, but in the letters on the pages of their sacred texts.

Of course, if we get too legalistic about vocalizing the name of God, we can miss the wisdom of these warnings and slip into superstition. We might come to believe in a God who makes arbitrary rules to sort the obedient from the deviant, protecting the former and smiting the latter when they slip up and say the wrong thing. If this is how we think about the mystery of God's name, we might be further from the truth than we were before God had a name for us at all. Because our posture before such a god will be terror, not curiosity.

Moses may have feared God, but his fear did not send him away any more than his confusion did, did it? This is where I think the genius and the power of the old story of the burning bush shows itself. Moses takes off his shoes, shields his eyes, and listens for the name of God. But when he hears the nonsense name "I will be who I will be," he doesn't throw up his hands and walk away since this God is an unknowable mystery. Quite the opposite. He leans in. He listens all the more closely. For this story is the beginning of Moses' relationship with the great "I AM," not the end of it. Moses is drawn only more deeply into relationship with Yahweh as he realizes all that he does not yet comprehend of this beautiful and burning God's mysterious but merciful ways.

This humble curiosity is what saved the Hebrew people from slavery quite literally in the story. I think it could save our lives too if we let it. If we let ourselves be drawn toward the mystery of the God who has no adequate name, we might also let ourselves be drawn toward the mystery of each other. Because your name is inadequate to who you are in the depths of yourself as well, as is the name of the person you think you know best in this world and the name of your oldest and archest enemy.

In fact, did you notice the sign in the story? The sign that God is the one Moses encountered that day is not the burning bush or the voice within it or even the inscrutable divine name. The sign that it was truly God who sent Moses to liberate God's people would be those very people, not scattered, but drawn together in worship. "This shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you," God says from the bush, "when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you ... all of you ... shall worship God on this mountain."

In what may be the most famous encounter with the divine in human history, Moses will get his confirmation it was real in his life with other people. For it is among that beautiful, fickle, chosen and beloved congregation that Moses will discover not only the one true God, but his own deepest gifts and truest identity as he and they stumble off into the wilderness toward freedom together.

I'll leave you with an old story about the Rabbi Yehuda of Prague, who, one legend says, brought the clay figure of the Golem to life by placing the name of God on a slip of paper under its tongue. Yehuda had a dream in which he died and was carried up to the great throne. There he met an angel, and said, "Please, tell me if my name is written in the book among those who will have a share in this kingdom." The angel told the rabbi to wait as all the names of those who had died that day were read from the book. The names he heard were strange to his ears. And as the angel read, the forms of souls would rise into the glory that swirled above the throne.

Thousands of names were read before the angel finished and closed the book. Rabbi Yehuda cried, "Please, there must be some mistake. My name was not among those you read." "Everyone's name is written in the book," said the angel. "Maybe some have only once in their lives been called by their right name. Here they must wait till they hear their names and know them. And if no one has ever called them by their right name, here they will wait until they are silent enough to hear the Master of the Universe himself calling them."

Rabbi Yehuda rose from his bed in tears and prayed, "Master of the Universe, grant that once in my life I would hear my true name on the lips of my brothers."

May each of us be so curious about the true name of the Master of the Universe, and so curious about the true name of our brothers and sisters in this life, strange and infuriating mysteries that they may be to us at times. And may each of us also be curious about our own true names which may only be heard on the lips of those sisters and those brothers. Perhaps what's first required for each of these saving revelations is that we, like Moses, simply stop and turn aside to the living, breathing miracle beside you, maybe even in this great congregation today.