

Our God Has a Name
Exodus 3:13-15 and John 3:1-21
February 5, 2017 International Protestant Church of Zurich
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

We are by any measure a diverse group of people here at IPC.

I don't know if anyone has ever actually counted, but we like to say that there are at least two dozen nationalities present on any given Sunday morning, and that sounds about right to me, as I look around. But, whether or not that's true, we are a very diverse congregation – and wonderfully so.

But even with all of that diversity, we do have a few things in common. We all speak English, for example. For some of us, it is our mother tongue, for others it isn't, but we come together on Sundays to worship using the English language. So, that is one of our common bonds.

We have many other traits and qualities in common, but we have one you may not have thought about – and that is, we all have names. At some point, early in our lives, we were given a name. Most of us had no choice in the matter. We were not consulted. No one approached us with a catalog of names and said, **«Hey, what do you think?»**

Instead, our parents – or maybe our grandparents or another person who was caring for us – simply gave us a name, a name we have had for our entire lives.

The custom has mostly disappeared now, but a central part of baptism at one time was the giving of the name, what was called the **«christening.»** Your Christian name used to be the name you were given at your baptism.

Today, as you know, it's simply your first name.

In the early days of the church, new converts to the faith often assumed Christian names as part of their total immersion in Christian faith. They would receive lengthy catechetical instruction, they would put on a white baptismal gown, and then they would get a new name. And when it was finished, when you came up out of the water, you knew that you were a different person from the one who went under the waters of baptism.

For centuries, in the Roman Catholic baptismal liturgy, the priest would meet parents and godparents and baby, and he would ask, **«What name do you give to your child?»**

And after the parents answered this and a few other questions, the family moved into the church for the rest of the baptismal liturgy.

I had a colleague in ministry at one time who used to say to parents near the beginning of the liturgy, **«Name this child!»** And she said it with kind of a stern look, and the parents would be startled, as if to say, **«Well, we've already done that.»**

Sometimes during the baptism I ask parents, «**What is this child's name?**» and the parents sometimes look hurt and offended, as if to say, «**Don't you know?**» Or «**Have you forgottent already?**»

But of course it's part of liturgy. Baptism has always been – at least in part – about assuming a new identity. We become someone new in Christ. And – this is important to see for what we are going to talk about today – that new identity is often expressed in a name.

My parents tell me that before I was born they had chosen two names – a boy's name and a girl's name – because there were no ultrasounds in those days and no way of knowing my gender in advance. There was a lot of guessing, of course, but no way of knowing for sure.

Anyway, the boy's name they had chosen was of course Douglas, but the girl's name – aren't you curious to know this? – the girl's name was Karen. Try not to think about me as Karen.

This custom of giving a name is not unique to Christians. Anthropologists say that the custom dates back to the earliest human beings. Our earliest ancestors named their children, often with great care. Names, in some cultures especially, have enormous significance.

This year, more than 120 million babies will be born around the world, and of those who survive their birth – we happen to live in a part of the world where most babies do – but those who survive their birth will undergo the initiation process of receiving a name.

I want to spend some time with you this morning thinking about what it means to have a name, and in particular what it means that God has a name.

We are five weeks along in a sermon series about what Christians believe, a series that will take us all the way to Holy Week, and today I want to look with you at the nature and character of God. Such a small topic, right?

Last week Sam introduced us to this idea that God has some wonderful and unique qualities and characteristics, and next week we will look together at creation and providence, the two main jobs that God the father has, theologically speaking.

But today, I want to look with you at that story in Exodus chapter 3 and examine together what it means that God has a name, that Moses dared to ask God for his name. We sometimes take this part of the story for granted, but I want you to see that it's extraordinary.

By way of background, I think you should know that God and Moses had an unusual relationship, a relationship that was characterized by closeness and intimacy and even friendship.

Toward the end of Exodus – it's in chapter 33, if you're curious – we read that God spoke to Moses «**face to face, as a man speaks to a friend.**» That's the quote. Those are the words that are used.

So, this closeness and intimacy is emphasized all the way through the story – from the beginning of Exodus to the end. And it's hard to imagine another biblical character who has this sort of relationship with

God. (I suppose you could argue that Jesus did, but that relationship – I hope you agree – falls in a different category altogether.)

Here's something else I want you to see about the relationship between God and Moses. Moses could be cheeky. I hope it's okay to use that word in this connection. Moses was surprisingly direct and honest with God.

The story for today takes place at the burning bush, where God gives Moses the job of leading the people out of Egypt. And it's almost as though Moses says – not aloud, but you can sense his calculation here – it's almost as though Moses says, **«Okay, if I'm going to do this thing that seems totally impossible to me, way beyond my capability, if I'm going to do it, then you and I are going to have to work very closely together. I need something from you.»**

In a sense, it's a bargain that Moses is making.

The first time I interviewed for a job in a church, the senior pastor invited me to stay with him at his house in his guest bedroom. I was kind of hoping for a hotel room, but he said, **«If we're going to work closely together, then I want to know what it's like to live together.»**

I'm not sure it made sense at the time, but looking back I can see the wisdom in what he did.

If we are going to work together day after day, if we are going to make hard decisions together, if we are going to trust each other, then we should be able to have breakfast together. Or something like that.

Moses wanted to know – you could say that he demanded to know – who God was. Extraordinary. I said that Moses was cheeky, and what I am referring to was that Moses raised objection after objection to doing this work that God wanted him to do.

I have always thought that if God appeared to me and gave me a job to do, I would say, **«Okay.»** End of conversation.

But not Moses. Three times he raised an objection. And the third time – you can find this in chapter four – the third time we read that **«the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses.»** Their first fight. And it was not their last. I once heard someone say that Moses and God sound like a couple who have been married for a long time.

I love this story, as maybe you can detect. It was the first story I ever preached about. And I have come back to it again and again over the years. And partly that's because this is a call story. All pastors are very interested in call stories. But mostly I was interested in this story because it is a story about a relationship between God and a human being. You could say that this story shows us how it's done.

When it's good, and when that relationship is healthy, and when it's growing and thriving, this is what it looks like. There is more open and direct communication here between God and Moses than in lots of marriages I know. Both Moses and God act as though the relationship matters, as though their opinions need to be heard, as though there is something enormous at stake.

Back to the beginning of the story. When God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush, God says (and these are important words),

“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, ⁸ 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....”

I think what we need to see here is that God is affected by what happens to us. The Bible does not tell us about a God who is indifferent, or distant, or uncaring. God is moved by what happens to us. God grieves when we suffer. And God is determined not to leave us in our suffering.

In adult education we are having a series right now about Israel, and last week I taught a single class about Islam, which is a major factor in Israel’s life right now, both internally and externally, and even though there wasn’t time to explore the subject as deeply as I wanted, I was able to say this much: the God we meet in the Koran is very different from the God we meet in the Bible.

I don’t agree with the statement that we both worship the same God, I don’t know of many biblical scholars or theologians who would agree with that statement, even though it would be nice – wouldn’t it? – if we could say something like that. It might solve a lot of problems.

But I don’t agree with that statement because we believe such vastly different things about God. There is nothing – or almost nothing – in the Koran about a God who cares and grieves and suffers and loves and shows compassion and so on, but that is the God we meet in the Bible. That is the God we meet in this story. And that is the God I am trying to introduce to you today.

And so, Moses says in response to that,

“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?”

And that, as you might imagine, is quite a question. What is your name? Who are you? What is your identity? What should I tell others about you?

So, here we are at the theme I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon. What does it mean to have a name? When you tell someone your name, what are you revealing about yourself?

At the beginning of worship today, during the welcome, I introduced myself to you, as I always do. I said, «**My name is Doug. And that’s Sam.**» That was an invitation to a relationship.

One of our Swiss members explained to me that the name Doug to most Swiss ears sounds a lot like Dog, which helps to explain why I sometimes get puzzled looks from people when I introduce myself. So, sometimes I say, «**My name is Douglas**» even though that sounds quite formal to me.

But either way, when I tell you my name, I am inviting you to know me. It’s the beginning point of a relationship. It’s a form of intimacy.

I don’t know if you knew this or not, but when Jesus meets the men who turn out to be his closest friends, his inner circle – Peter, James, and John – he gives them nicknames. Cephas became Peter,

or the Rock. And James and John became Boanerges (Vaw-near-yes), a Greek word meaning Sons of Thunder.

What wonderful names. I know a little about what «Peter» means, and most you do too. I'm not altogether sure about «Sons of Thunder.» But at a very basic level, there was an intimacy that was expressed.

So, here in Exodus chapter three, at the burning bush, God says to Moses,

“I AM WHO I AM [OR I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE].” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Well, this is an extraordinary moment – not just in the relationship between God and Moses, but between God and everyone who would ever want to have a relationship with him. Our God has a name. Just like I do. Just like you do. We can know this God – or at least something about this God. We can speak with this God.

As many of you know, the people of Israel treated this name with great care and reverence. The name was never spoken aloud, which means we aren't really certain today how it should be pronounced. We certainly have an idea, but there is this uncertainty born of reverence.

When people are reading the Hebrew text, and they come upon this Hebrew word for «I AM,» they ordinarily substitute «the Lord.» or «Adonai.» Not speaking the name is a way of reverencing the name.

Which I have always thought was kind of curious. God gave us the name as a form of intimacy, but in response – and out of reverence – his people choose not to say it out loud. Here's what I would like for you to remember today. And I can summarize it in two words, two important words from classical theology which we should know. If someone were to ask you to describe God, these are two words to know – immanence and transcendence. Both of which, by the way, are on display in this story. It's not as though you can have one without the other. They are inseparably linked.

God's immanence, we say, is God's nearness and availability. You can know this God, and this God certainly knows you. This God wants to be in relationship with you. This God suffers when you are suffering. This God can be irritated by you, as Moses discovered very early in the relationship. But this God is also loyal and unconditional in his love. You can be irritating, but God is not going away.

Okay, but there is more. God – we say – is also something other, something mysterious, maybe even fearful. When the Bible says that God's ways are not our ways, the Bible is talking about God's transcendence, his mystery. I suppose that when a bush bursts into flames out in the Sinai desert, but is not consumed, when it does not disintegrate in seconds into a pile of ashes, that's a signal of God's transcendence.

God told Moses to take his shoes off – remember? – because Moses was on holy ground. This was an ancient sign of vulnerability and respect. There are a couple of other examples of it in the Old Testament.

Moses was in the presence of an almighty and all powerful God. God was signalling his majesty and his holiness in that moment.

So, there we have it. Our God is immanent and transcendent, approachable (in a sense), and at the same time powerful and majestic, maker of all things visible and invisible, as the creed puts it.

That's the God we believe in.

- That's the God we call out to when everything seems lost. On the cross, Jesus used the words of Psalm 22, «**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.**»
- That's the God we are angry with when things do not go our way. «**How could a good and loving God have allowed this to happen?**»
- That's the God who asks for more of us than we think we are capable of.
- That's the God who believes in us, who sees us as far more capable and gifted than we see ourselves.
- That's the God we worship here every single Sunday.
- That's the God we sing about in our hymns.
- That's the God we pray to in our weekly prayers.
- That's the God who knows all about you and your life, even when you are paying no attention at all to him.
- That's the God who, like the father in Jesus' parable, stands in the road with his arms wide open to receive us, after we have been off in a far country, squandering everything, including our own dignity and self-esteem.
- That's the God we meet in scripture – in stories like the one we read today, but also in stories scattered throughout the Bible.

God says, «**I have seen your suffering. I have come down to deliver you.**» And what do you say?

Let us pray...