

Sunday, February 5, 2017 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “Our God Has a Name”

Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:13-15

(The second reading for Sunday will be John 3:1-21.)

Note: We continue our late winter/early spring sermon series on “What We Believe.” Before moving on to the work that God does – namely, creation and providence – I want to spend one more week exploring the nature of God. The Exodus reading for this week (3:13-15) is astonishing in that Moses asks for and receives **God’s name**. In the giving of a name, we discover something about God – our God – that we need to know and pay attention to.

1. The context of this story is of course the burning bush and the call of Moses to lead God’s people out of Egypt. Within that conversation (which extends all the way to 4:13), Moses expresses several objections to being called. Almost from the beginning, God and Moses have a wonderful and unique relationship. Moses’ willingness to object to God’s call is breath-taking in itself, though please notice that this continued resistance has its limits. In 4:14 we read that “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses.” Moses apparently went a little too far, but the fact that he was willing to have this conversation with God at all is amazing. What do you say? Have you resisted God’s call in your life? Have you raised objections to God’s plans? How has it gone?
2. We could explore the relationship that Moses and God have throughout the Book of Exodus (it’s extraordinary), but the focus of my sermon is on the nature of God. Here – and throughout scripture – there is this theme of naming. To know another’s name is to have a relationship. So, first, Moses says to God (vs. 11), “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” And this question brings for the divine response (vs. 12) that “I will be with you.” Then Moses asks on behalf of the people (vs. 13), when “I come to the Israelites and I say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ And they say to me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” So, Moses says, the people will want to know too. And God gives the same answer (as in vs. 12) – namely, “I will be.” This is the divine name! “I will be who I will be,” which amounts to Yahweh in Hebrew (a name, by the way, which was never spoken aloud which is why there is a difference of opinion about how to pronounce it). In vs. 15, God says to Moses, “This is my name forever. This is my memorial for all generations.” It’s difficult to overstate how important all of this is – Moses’ request and God’s answer. The creator of all that is (seen and unseen) has just spoken his name aloud and revealed his identity in a deeply personal way. For discussion you may want to reflect on the decision that parents make to name a child – or the decision that we make nearly every day to reveal our names to strangers. Once we’ve given our names, we have revealed something about ourselves, haven’t we?
3. Notice that God’s name leaves an incomplete sentence! He “will be” ... what? Well, as the story of scripture unfolds, this question is answered. He “will be” savior, healer, revealer, covenant maker, and so on. God’s name is the key, so to speak, that unlocks his identity. Once we know his name, we begin to notice other things about him. By giving us his name, he has invited us into an unfolding relationship of daily discovery.
4. In our understanding of God, we usually speak of two sides or natures – God’s immanence and transcendence. God’s transcendence is relatively easy to grasp. God, we say, is “beyond us.” When we speak of God as being “omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent,” we are of course speaking of a transcendent God. While teaching an adult education class last Sunday on Islam, I mentioned that Islam emphasizes this side of God to the exclusion of the other. The God of Islam is not approachable and is not known for mercy, love, grace, and compassion. That other side of God is his immanence. God, we Christians say, desires to be in relationship with us. The creator of the heavens and the earth comes to us, reveals his name to us, and wants to be known by us. To see both of

these sides in God – to feel both God’s immanence and transcendence – sets Christianity apart from most (all?) the other religions of the world. What language would you use to describe this – to say that God is at once utterly mysterious (“his ways are not our ways”), but also full of love for his people. Notice how Exodus 3 begins. God says to Moses, “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....” I know of no other religion where God is moved by the human condition, where God is affected by our plight. When you think about your relationship with God, isn’t it this combination of natures – immanence and transcendence – that is most important to our faith? Is it even possible for us to imagine one nature without the other?