

## **What's in a Name?**

September 3, 2017 – Wilderness Sunday

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Texts: Exodus 2:11-25; 3:1-15

This week, we begin the Season of Creation. Some of you may be unfamiliar with this season – and with good reason: it is relatively new, and not yet universal. It began in the early 2000s in Australia, in the Australia Lutheran Church. Most of the liturgical year centers on the life of Jesus – we have a season of Advent, anticipating the birth of Jesus; a season of Epiphany after the birth of Jesus; a season of Lent preparing for the trial and death of Jesus; and of course, the season of Easter, after the Resurrection of Jesus. The Season of Creation was developed for a couple of reasons – one, as I mentioned, was to give a little balance among the Trinity. But the more important reason was a concern that with over half of the world's population living in and around urban centers as this century began, fewer people are familiar with nature. And of course, it has always been the case that some people live far from some natural elements. So, some people have never seen the ocean, others have never seen a mountain, others have never experienced wilderness. The second reason has to do with the Bible as nature literature. The Bible is set in an agrarian culture, and was written by people with an intimate relationship to the natural world. Again and again, it uses nature in metaphors, similes, and as examples. Providing time in the church year to remember God as Creator provides an opportunity to build a deeper awareness of the natural world so that we might more fully appreciate Biblical literature. And also, we can learn about God by taking a closer look at God's creation – the natural world becomes another text that reveals God, just as the Bible reveals God.

In 2004, about 50 churches across Australia experimented with a Season of Creation. In 2005, it was an option for churches across Australia, and congregations in other countries began to take note. By 2006, when we decided to try it out here at Frame, other congregations in Canada, Europe, and the United States were becoming aware of it. We were among the first congregations in this country to celebrate the Season of Creation – and this is our 12<sup>th</sup> year marking these four weeks. Most years, we follow the Season of Creation lectionary, but this year I realized that a down side of the Season of Creation was that we have been missing the readings that had come in the regular lectionary, which means that we hadn't read Exodus since before I came here. So this year, we are using the regular lectionary readings, while still observing the Season of Creation.

And this week that works – it is Wilderness Sunday, and we will be hearing a story about Moses in the wilderness. But before we get to that story, we just heard the first story about Moses as an adult. In that story, a lot happened – Moses killed a man, fled to Midian, got married, and had a son. And we also learned something important about Moses – he has a strong sense of justice, and a commitment to working for justice. We saw three instances of that in these episodes: he killed the Egyptian who was unjustly beating the Hebrew slave; he tried to work out a conflict between two Hebrew men; and he intervened when he saw men harassing the daughters of the Midian priest at the well. On each occasion, Moses

stepped in to try and right the wrongs he observed, and he did so knowing that it could impact him. And there were indeed consequences – some bad, some good. He had to flee what had been his home country, Egypt, to go to Midian; and, he ended up being welcomed by the Midian priest, and finding a wife.

And that brings him to the next chapter, so let us listen to that story: Exodus 3:1-15. You might want to take out your pew Bibles and follow along, because we are going to be looking at a few things. But before we read that, let's take another look at the end of chapter 2, because there was a kind of “meanwhile, back at the ranch” moment there.

Near the end of chapter two, there is a turn in the story: the king of Egypt (who is, as I pointed out last week, nameless) died. And the Hebrew people continued to suffer. Now, I want to look at two sets of four words here – the first is about the Hebrew people. The four words are translated as two words that are repeated in English, but they are four distinct words in Hebrew: in English, it says, “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. <sup>24</sup> God heard their groaning....” I spoke to you last week about a new book called *The Exodus: How It Happened and Why It Matters* by a Jewish Old Testament scholar named Richard Elliott Friedman. Friedman follows the Hebrew in translating it with 4 different words: “And the children of Israel groaned from the work, and they cried out, and their wail went up to God from the work. And God heard their moaning....” They groaned, cried out, there was a wail, and moaning....there is a greater sense of intensity as one after another word is piled on. The suffering is becoming deeper and deeper.

And in response, there is another cluster of four words: “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. <sup>25</sup> God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” Again, I'm going to go back to Professor Friedman's translation which seems more accurate: “And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, with Jacob. And God saw the children of Israel. And God knew!”

Two of these words are somewhat more intense in Hebrew. The first word, God heard, implies hearing and responding. When it is used of humans, it suggests “Hear and obey” or “listen.” It has a little more intensity than simply “hear” which one can do passively. It is the first word in the creed that observant Jews say each day, the Shema “Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad” which Friedman translates as “Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God. YHWH is One” or more commonly “Hear Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one.” The verb there, Sh'ma, or Hear, has a little more to it – hear and take note, or listen.

And the final verb is the verb “yada” which means “to know” – and it suggests a thorough, intimate knowledge. It is the word used at some places in the Old Testament to suggest intimate physical relationships, as in “Adam knew his wife, Eve, and she bore a son....” The NRSV translation “take notice” doesn't quite go far enough. Yada means to know deeply, to know intimately. God knew the depth of the Hebrew peoples' suffering. God understood. What is conveyed is that God does not stand at a distance from our pain – God sees and enters into our experience with us. God quite literally feels our pain.

And so it is after these two cluster of four words conveying with some intensity both the extent of the Hebrew suffering and God's hearing, remembering, seeing, and knowing that suffering, that we come to the next chapter. This will be God's response.

Moses is in the wilderness – and this isn't a desert, as some people sometimes think when we hear about the people of Israel traveling in the wilderness, or Moses being in the wilderness. It really is just uncharted territory, or more aptly, unsettled territory. And this has symbolic as well as literal meaning, for Moses' life is uncharted – he came from Egypt and has stayed in Midian. But it is not home – it is neither among the Hebrew people, where he spent his younger years; nor is it Egypt, where he spent his growing up years in the court of the Pharaoh. Moses is already somewhat metaphorically in uncharted territory – is he Hebrew or Egyptian? And now he is in uncharted territory, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, and he is about to enter even more uncharted territory. He is about to meet God. Listen to the word of God from Exodus 3:1-15.

**3** Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord said, "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, <sup>8</sup> 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

<sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, "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?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I am who I am."<sup>[a]</sup> He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" <sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord,<sup>[b]</sup> the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,  
and this my title for all generations.

Notice that Moses isn't at a temple or an altar – he's at work, doing what he does, tending the sheep. Notice too that it is his curiosity that brings him to God. And then God calls to him: "Moses! Moses!" He calls him twice, as he called Abraham back in Genesis, and as he will call the boy-prophet Samuel later, and as the risen Jesus will call the Pharisee Saul much later – Saul who will become Paul as he responds to the call of Jesus in his life.

"Moses! Moses!" and Moses replies "Here I am" as Abraham before him and Samuel after him responded. The writer is showing that this is a classic call narrative. And indeed it is a classic call narrative – it has all the usual elements: the call from God, the protest from the one called, and the reassurance and reaffirmation by God of the call. But first, God introduces himself to Moses, and does so in very personal terms: "I am the God of your father," and then God adds the standard formula: "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." God then goes on to describe to Moses his awareness of the suffering of the Israelites, and then tells him what he is to do: "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

And Moses isn't fooled by how simple God made it sound – here comes the protest: Moses asks, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And God responds with a big promise, that we sometimes overlook in this episode with all the special effects of the burning bush, and the big reveal of the name of God. God says, "I will be with you." And this means something now after the earlier descriptions – we know that God doesn't just stand at a distance and monitor the situation; God enters in fully, and is in it, whatever it is, with us.

This is what Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall said the crucifixion of Jesus reveals to us – there is no point at which Jesus turns back and says, "I've done enough." There is no limit to God's solidarity with us. God enters fully into our joy, fully into our work for justice, fully into our suffering. God is with us. God has been with us. God will be with us.

And this will be the sign, he tells Moses, we'll be back here again. My mother used to tell my younger brother similar things when he was little and she and Dad were going out at night – he would be anxious, and she would say something like, "Jonathan, you'll have a good time with the babysitter, and then tomorrow, we'll have Cheerios for breakfast." It wasn't the promise of a treat – it was the promise of tomorrow, and that's the promise that God gave Moses. "We'll be back here before long—you and I, and all the people."

So Moses asked another question, "When I go to the Israelites and say 'the God of your ancestors sent me' what if they ask your name? What should I tell them?" And God gave them his name, YHWH, which is a form of the verb 'to be' and there is some considerable ambiguity about what exactly it means. Old Testament scholar Terence Freitheim says should best be translated, "I am what I will be." God is telling Moses, says Freitheim, that he will be with them in this process and on the journey just as he is with Moses now: I am what I will be. Others have pointed out that the name, Yahweh, has a breath sound to it. Still others have said it could be said to be translated as "Being itself." Professor Friedman says it is best translated "He causes it to be" which stresses God as the source of all being.

In any event, regardless of its meaning, it is not a title, it is a name. If it were me, we'd say it isn't Pastor, it's Susan. It's not Mr. President, it's Don. God has given God's name to Moses. And this brings me to my last point for today.

The last thing I want to point out about this exchange between Yahweh and Moses is that God is not looking for blind obedience here. God seems to have no problem with Moses expressing his objections. The dialogue will go on for quite a while longer—to the opening verses of chapter 7, with only a brief pause for Moses to make his first attempt at visiting Pharaoh. It is an ongoing conversation, one might even say an ongoing negotiation, that Moses and God are having. Apparently, God doesn't want blind obedience, God wants engaged collaboration. God has made the mission completely vulnerable to human frailty and will. God makes some changes in response to the concerns of Moses. The mission, ultimately, will only succeed to the degree that Moses rises to the mission and engages it with integrity, courage, and commitment. And that engagement is so important to God that God is willing to risk the mission to get it. Just as God has said and shown that God is all in with us, God wants the same from us.

And God giving his name is a signal about this – God is getting personal with us, and not relying on a title – we are not asked to call God Ruler of the Universe – we are offered intimacy with God. This is why it has always bothered me that most Christians defer to Jewish tradition in this and use a title, “Lord,” instead of the name God offered. And it is a feudal title at that, defining the relationship as Lord and vassal, which is not the relationship God offers. If we take nothing else from these chapters, I hope we get how very revolutionary this idea of God is: God is not at a distance from us, God is all in with us, God cares about our engagement, God listens to our concerns, God has made God's mission vulnerable to our weaknesses because it is that important to God that we engage as committed partners and not as occasionally obedient and usually formal servants. We should have known when God was wrestling with Jacob that this is no ordinary God. And yet, God relies on ordinary us for the success of the divine mission, for the coming of the Kingdom. That is why our faithfulness is so important. Yes, Yahweh, here we are. And you will be with us. Amen.