



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

Exodus 33:18–34:9

Twelfth Message

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“What’s in a name?” said Juliet to Romeo. “That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”¹ Can the names Capulet and Montague divide the lovers?

What’s in a name? A name can cost a lot of money. Companies pay big dollars to branding consultants to create an identity: a name, a logo, even a color. Some names are meaningful. Others are meaningless but designed to sound meaningful: Agilent and Keysight are a couple of local examples.

Car models have names. Some are indecipherable strings of letters and numbers. Some are evocative: the Ford Mustang, the Dodge Viper. Others leave us scratching our heads. Who named the Chevy Nova (*no va*, “no go”) or the AMC Gremlin?

Sometimes the public usurps the naming. In London each new skyscraper quickly acquires a public nickname: the Gherkin, the Shard, the Walkie-Talkie, the Cheese-Grater. No one even knows the official names of the buildings. Apple has named its new campus Apple Park, but we keep on calling it the Spaceship. Companies may eventually acquiesce: Federal Express finally renamed itself FedEx; Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing renamed itself 3M.

Churches have names. Such naming used to be easy: First Baptist Church, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Peninsula Bible Church. But now church names avoid any hint of being a church: The River, The Highway, Reality.

We have names: a family name and one or more given names. New parents consult books to find meaningful names. Parents may name us after other people; that’s true for both of my given names. Some people grow tired of their name or view it negatively, and switch to using their middle name. Many Asians adopt an English name. I have a Thai name, as does the rest of my family.

Names are of great significance in the Bible. We’re told the meaning of many names. These can be positive: Samuel, “heard of God,” or Judah, “the Lord be praised.” Or they can be negative: Jacob the trickster or heel-grabber, Nabal the fool. Sometimes God changes a name: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul.

God himself has a name. At the Burning Bush, God commissioned Moses to return to Egypt and tell Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let my people go.’” But Moses raised several objections. First, Who am I? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” The Lord replied, “But I will be with you.” Moses followed with a second question: Who are you?

“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to

you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exod 3:13-15 ESV)

God lays out his name in three stages. First, the enigmatic, “I AM WHO I AM” (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) which he abbreviates to “I AM” (*ehyeh*). This first person term is appropriate as he addresses Moses directly. But Moses needs a name to take to the Israelites, so God translates the name into the third person, “He is.” But that’s not what we read in our English translations, which universally use “the LORD” in smallcaps. God’s name is written in Hebrew as the consonants YHWH. Scholars reckon it was pronounced Yahweh, related to the verb “he is” (*yihyeh*). Why then do translations render this as “the LORD”? Lest they break the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Exod 20:7), Jews avoided saying the name. It became the ineffable tetragrammaton, the unspeakable four-letter word. Instead they would say *Adonai*, Lord. Yahweh was translated into Greek and then Latin as “Lord” and thence into English. The practice of smallcaps began with the KJV (1611).

God’s name is Yahweh, “He is,” or “I am.” “I AM WHO I AM.” What does this mean? God will be God. He will be true to himself; he will be faithful. God’s name therefore develops his answer to Moses’s first question: “I will be with you.”

What’s in a name? A lot. Names are important. Today, as we conclude the golden calf section, God’s name is front and center. God has assured Moses that his Presence will go with him and the Israelites when they leave Sinai to journey to the Promised Land. Moses has not yet finished petitioning God.

Show Me Your Glory (33:18-23)

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (Exod 33:18-23)

“Please show me your glory.” Glory is a difficult term to define. God’s glory is a manifestation of his Presence, usually accompanied by the cloud. Most often it is in response to grumbling or rebellion by the people. The cloud descends and God’s glory is seen by all the people so as to rebuke and humble them. But now Moses requests a private, personal manifestation of God’s Presence. Nowhere else in Scripture is this bold request made. Not even Elijah and Isaiah requested the manifestations of God’s presence that they were given.

God has just assured Moses that his Presence will go with him. Now Moses wants visible assurance of that Presence.

The Lord's reply is presented as three speeches. In the first speech (19), his response goes above and beyond Moses's request. "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD' (Yahweh)." We should probably take these statements as synonymous. The Lord's goodness is his character which he will proclaim in his name. The Lord offers Moses something better than the glory cloud; he offers him an exposition of his name, of what it means to be "I AM." As if to whet his appetite, the Lord offers a riff on his name: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." This double riff follows the same pattern as the original presentation of his name at the Burning Bush: "I AM WHO I AM." God will be God; he will be true to self. Now he elaborates on what being God looks like.

"I will be gracious...I will show mercy" (ESV) or "I will have mercy...I will have compassion" (NIV). These are new terms that have not previously appeared in Exodus. Mercy and compassion are what the Israelites desperately need. Dare Moses hope that God show this mercy and compassion to the stiff-necked Israelites?

The second and third speech address the logistics of the impending revelation. No human can survive seeing God's face. Therefore the Lord will cover Moses's face as he passes by, so that Moses will see only his back but not his face.

God Proclaims His Name (34:1-9)

The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (34:1-9)

The commandment to cut two new stone tablets is promising, implying that new copies of the treaty will be written, and the covenant reinstated. God will once again take Israel to be his people, he will be their God, and he will dwell among them.

The Lord descended in the cloud to the top of Mt Sinai and stood there with Moses. All other manifestations of God's glory are at a distance. Again we see Moses's friendship with God, that God's Pres-

ence should be right beside him. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed his name:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (34:6-7)

Who is Yahweh? What's in his name? What is the meaning of this one who has already declared himself as "I AM WHO I AM," "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy"?

The significance of this name is best understood against the backdrop of the second commandment, which we've seen over the last four weeks forms the backdrop for the entire golden calf narrative.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (20:4-6)

The commandment and the proclamation of the name contain shared language: the visitation of the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation, and showing steadfast love to thousands. The commandment divides the Israelites into two sets: those who love the Lord and those who hate the Lord. It's black and white, binary; there's no middle ground. To those who love him and keep his commandments the Lord will show steadfast love, *hesed* love, love that is loyal to covenant. Moses is in this category. He's been loyal to God; God will be loyal to him. But all the other Israelites are in the other category. They have bowed down to images of their own making. They have given their loyalty and affections to another, committing treason and adultery. They've broken the covenant and the stone tablets lie shattered. Therefore covenant-loyal love no longer applies. They are those who hate him in this black and white world. All they can expect is that God will visit their iniquity upon them and their offspring. The second commandment holds out no hope for the golden calf worshippers. It only condemns.

In the proclamation of the Name, the visiting of the iniquity of the fathers upon the children is still here. But the proclamation is a lot more hopeful than the second commandment. It is more hopeful in multiple ways. In the commandment the visiting iniquity was first, followed by showing *hesed* love. Here it is reversed so that the focus is on showing loyal love. Secondly, the showing *hesed* love part is greatly expanded to include compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Furthermore, these are new terms. Compassion and mercy were first mentioned in 33:19. This is the first mention of God forgiving humans. Thirdly, the commandment divided the Israelites into two groups, those who hate the Lord and those who love him. Whether he visits iniquity or shows *hesed* love depends on human behavior. It's a quid pro quo. You show loyalty to God and he'll show loyalty to you. You show disloyalty to God and he'll show disloyalty to you. If you're among the idolaters, all you can expect is the visitation of iniquity. There is no crossover. But in the revelation of God's name there is no mention at all of human behavior. God's character is not driven by human behavior but by being true to himself. God is God.

He is who he is. He will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and compassion on whom he will have compassion.

God will be God. How does God want to be known? He is “a God merciful and gracious” (ESV) or “compassionate and gracious” (NIV). He will have compassion on whom he will have compassion because compassion and grace are intrinsic to his nature. He abounds in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness; his supply won't run dry. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. There is cross-over. There is hope for those who have broken the second commandment, those who have given their affections to another, those who have made idols and worshipped them, those who have broken the covenant. Golden-calf worshippers can receive compassion, grace and forgiveness from God. To drive home the point God mentions all three major words for wrong-doing: iniquity, transgression, sin. All can be forgiven. Why? Because the sinners are deserving? No, because it is in God's character to do so. They can be forgiven by God being God.

A major theme of the Book of Exodus is God making himself known: to Moses, to the Israelites, to Pharaoh, and to the Egyptians. How does God want to be known? Here's how. This is what it means to be “I AM.”

How did Moses respond to the Lord's proclamation of his name? He quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. I think this proclamation took him by surprise. It went so far beyond anything he asked and dared hope for. He had asked God, “Please show me your glory.” He received so much more. His immediate response was to fall on his face and give homage and allegiance to this sort of God.

But still Moses is not finished in his role as intercessor between God and his people. He has one more request, his fourth. It is the most daring, and it summarizes the previous three petitions.

“If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.” (34:9)

Moses *has* found favor in the Lord's sight; that was a major thrust of 33:12-17 where the phrase was used five times. Therefore he can be bold to make three requests, confident that the Lord will grant them. The first request: “let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people.” The Lord's tabernacling Presence *will* go in the midst of his people. The tabernacle will be built. This tabernacling Presence will show that the people find favor in the Lord's sight and that they are distinct from other nations. This is how Israel will be known, as the people which has the Lord in their midst.

Now it is Moses's turn to call the people a stiff-necked people. The Lord has previously used the term three times. He used it first as grounds for destroying the people (32:9). He then used it as grounds for why his tabernacling Presence could not go with the people lest he destroy them (33:3,5). Now Moses uses it to show God why he has to tabernacle in the midst of the people. Not in spite of them being a stiff-necked people but precisely because they are a stiff-necked people. It's their only hope.

This is similar to the situation before and after the Flood. “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Because humanity had ruined itself and the earth, God brought ruin upon humanity and the earth. After the Flood

the Lord promised he would never do that again. Why? “I will never again curse the ground because of man, *for* the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21). Humanity's evil heart was grounds for God's judgment but also grounds for his mercy. The same is true with the golden calf incident. The world needs God's faithfulness symbolized by the rainbow because humanity is sinful. Israel needed God's Presence because they were stiff-necked. We need God not because we are good but because we are bad. We are prone to wander. We turn in on self. We worship idols, things of our own making.

Moses's second request is “pardon our iniquity and our sin.” In his second petition Moses had said, “If you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book” (32:32). God had not granted that request. He would not allow Moses to stand in the place of Israel. But now that the Lord has revealed himself to be one “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,” Moses has confidence to ask him to pardon the people's iniquity and sin. This, too, is the first occurrence in Scripture of this word “pardon.”

Moses's third request is “take us for your inheritance.” Be faithful to what you said when you first met with Israel at Mt Sinai: “you will be my treasured possession among all peoples” (19:5). You'll be mine, I'll be yours, and we will dwell together. I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. Notice how yet again Moses shows solidarity with the people: take *us*. Each time God has tried to reject the people, offloading them onto Moses as his people, Moses has reminded God, they're *your* people.

We've come a long way since the Israelites forsook God and worshiped the golden calf which they had made. Moses was the intercessor who stood in the breach between God and his people. God wanted to destroy the people, because they were a stiff-necked people. He wanted to start over with Moses. But Moses implored him to change his mind, and he did. The people had sinned a great sin. Moses asked God to forgive their great sin, offering himself in their place. God did not grant that request. When God told Moses to lead the people on, but he would not come in their midst because they were a stiff-necked people, Moses again interceded until God said his Presence would go with them. Moses asked God to show him his glory, and God showed him so much more. He proclaimed his name, his character, how he wished himself to be known, what it means to be God. Finally Moses asked God to be in their midst precisely because they were a stiff-necked people, and to pardon, and to take them as his.

This is how God wanted to be known by Israel. This proclamation of the Lord's name became like a creed in Israel's subsequent history; it recurs throughout the Old Testament. This was bedrock truth in which Israel could be anchored. We next encounter it in Numbers 14. After Moses sent the twelve spies into the land, the Israelites wanted to pick a new leader and return to Egypt. Again the Lord wanted to strike them, disinherit them and begin again with Moses. Again Moses intervened. Again he used the argument, Consider what the Egyptians will say; think of the reputation you'll have in the neighborhood. But now he had a new argument:

“please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression...’ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.” (Num 14:17-19)

Notice that he says that forgiveness demonstrates not the Lord's weakness but his power.

The prophets found hope in this character of God's. For example, Joel urged the people,

**Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:13)**

But others took offense that God should be this way to people they didn't like. Jonah was angry enough to die because God was merciful to the Ninevites:

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2)

The tension between God showing steadfast love and visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children remained, even though the balance had been shifted in such favor to steadfast love. Ultimately, Israel did not avail itself of this sort of God. No matter how much compassion and mercy the Lord extended to his people, they rejected it, and he visited their iniquity upon them, sending them into exile.

There is a tension between visiting iniquity and showing steadfast love. But God has resolved that tension in Jesus. He has also given a fuller proclamation of himself and of his name in Jesus.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:14,17-18)

The Lord's proclamation of his name was an exposition of his name "Yahweh," I am. Jesus, God incarnate, is a much fuller exposition of his name, of what it means to be God. Jesus made him known; he exegeted him; he explicated him. He was God's Presence among his people. Sinners and lepers approached him, crying out, "Lord, have mercy," *Kyrie eleison*. They couldn't approach the religious leaders to ask for mercy; the leaders interpreted their condition as being God's visitation of iniquity upon them. What they needed was compassion and mercy, the same things that the golden-calf worshipers needed. This they found in Jesus.

God resolved the tension between visiting iniquity and showing steadfast love in Jesus on the cross. In Israel's most iniquitous act, putting to death the author of life, Jesus bore their sin and submitted to the curse due upon them. God vindicated Jesus, raising him from death to new life, raising him to his right hand in glory, where he has enthroned him and given him a name. What is this name?

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

What's in a name? A lot when it is God's name, a name he shares with none other except the Lord Jesus Christ through whom he makes himself known. In the Old Testament that name was reserved

for God alone. To give it to any other was blasphemy. But God shares that name with the risen and enthroned Christ Jesus.

God extends forgiveness. He extended forgiveness to the Jews who put Jesus to death. He expanded the circle of forgiveness to include Gentiles. He extends forgiveness to all who will repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. God is a gracious and compassionate God who forgives our sins in Christ Jesus.

Two weeks ago in Mississippi a legislator submitted a bill to the state House, "To require the ten commandments to be displayed in each public school classroom; to require teachers to have the ten commandments recited aloud at the beginning of each school day."

Is this how we want God to be known? The Ten Commandments were given to Israel alone. They were the treaty between God and his people. The Ten Commandments condemned Israel, especially the second commandment. Their iniquities were visited upon them. The Ten Commandments would condemn us were we to place ourselves under them, and the second commandment would be especially devastating. We have all worshiped and served things other than God.

Better than reciting the ten commandments would be to recite God's proclamation of his name:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

We've recited this each of the last four Sundays after confession of sins. I hope you're well on your way toward memorizing it.

Jesus has made this God known. To Jesus one can cry out, "Lord, have mercy," and he does have mercy.

Many people see a conflict between the God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the Gospels. Many say they have trouble with the God of the OT, but most have no trouble with the Jesus of the NT. If all you see is the Ten Commandments and the visiting of iniquity then all you'll see of God is a God of wrath. But, as we saw two weeks ago, God's jealousy and wrath is predicated on relationship. God desires a relationship with all humanity. Intrinsic to his character is to be compassionate and gracious; he overflows in his steadfast love and faithfulness. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. This is what it means for God to be God. There is no contradiction between this sort of God and the Jesus we see in the Gospels.

This is our God. To him be the glory.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II.2.