



GLORY IN THE NAME

Catalog No. 1454

Exodus 3:11-15

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

December 14th, 2003

Whenever a son or daughter is born it seems like everyone is eager to contribute to the naming process. Names are significant and make abiding personal connections like nothing else does. Names can connect with family history, or reach even further back into Biblical history. They can also bring something new to the family tree. My daughter and son-in-law have done well in keeping the names of their children secret until birth, and then surprised a significant family member with the supreme gift of the "name." They named their first two daughters after their grandmothers, Mary and Emily. We all waited with anticipation, wondering what name they would give their son. Shortly after the baby's birth, Corey said he would be named Wesley David. "David" was in honor of Corey's brother-in-law, and Becky's brother, who died shortly after birth. The name was an indescribable gift to me. Hearing it filled me with emotion. The mere mention of that name will always reach back into our history as a family and make it new in wonderful and unforeseeable ways.

Relating the story of the birth of Jesus, Matthew in his gospel wants his readers to understand that Jesus' name is highly significant. It reaches back seven hundred years in Israel's memory. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Matthew says, "'BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,' which translated means, 'GOD WITH US'" (Matt 1:23). What would be Immanuel's significance to the nation? How did Jesus make it new? And what does the name Immanuel mean to you?

To help us understand this great gift of the divine name I would like to go back even further than Isaiah, to Moses, when the gift of God's personal name was first given. My prayer is that the name Immanuel will provoke as much emotion as the name of a son given back to you from the dead. We pick up our story in Exodus 3, the account of God's revealing himself to Moses in the burning bush. God also revealed to Moses his heart and his plan to redeem Israel from Egypt. Now, to Moses' great surprise, God invites him to play the leading role in the drama.

I. Moses' First Objection: Identity (3:11-12)

A. Moses' Objection: "Who am I?" (3:11)

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11 NASB)

Moses' response reveals the impact of his flight from Egypt and exile in the wilderness. No longer is he the man we saw in his prime: confident, self-assured, and needing no invitation to mediate "justice" for the oppressed. His response to God is that he is unfit for the task. He even questions his own identity. Forty years later, the stinging question put by one of his own countrymen, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us?" still hurts, robbing Moses of any sense of calling. So dramatic is the transformation in his demeanor that the reader is forced to ponder the reasons behind such a change. Houtman suggests a whole range of possibilities:

Is he no longer the man who reacts impulsively, but someone who is cautious, so guarded that he could be accused of a lack of self-confidence? Or has he turned into a disillusioned individual, who is no longer prepared to work for God? Or on the contrary, is he a realist, who knows what the score is: he is a fugitive murderer, a man without influence or power, who passes his days in foreign parts as a shepherd.¹

Perhaps Moses felt a combination of all of these things. The painful memory of his failure has haunted him for so many years he no longer desires leadership. I can identify with that. I have similar feelings myself. I am what you might call a "reluctant" leader. At fifty-two, I feel my failures more than my successes, and am more keenly aware of my weaknesses than ever before.

But Moses' lack of identity poses no hindrance to God. He explains that the success of the mission does not depend on who Moses is, but on who God is.

B. God's Answer: "I am with you" (3:12)

And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (3:12)

Responding to Moses' question, "Who am I?" God says that it really doesn't matter. He will be with him to see that the task is completed successfully and all obstacles are overcome. God is saying, in effect, "In short, it's not about you, it's about Me." The phrase, "I will be with you," is much more significant than a generic promise of God's presence. Gowen has shown that in the majority of instances it is addressed to Israel's leadership when they are called to a task of insurmountable proportions, "or when setting out on an undertaking

that seems very likely to fail.”² So God reassures Moses that he will be with him to protect, support and encourage him until the task to which he has been called is completed. Just as the bush was not consumed in the fire, so Moses will not be consumed.

The sign that God gives to Moses is that when the task is completed, the people will worship in full freedom back at this mountain, far from the tyranny of Egypt. Then Moses will know that God has been with him to complete the assignment. Thus, Moses standing before the burning bush is a foreshadowing of the nation that will worship in front of the fiery mountain. It’s intriguing that the sign is not given until the mission has been completed; for now, Moses will have to accept it by faith.

It is significant that when Jesus commissioned his disciples, they met him at the mountain he had designated. Once there he charged them with the incredible task of making disciples from all nations. That task was no less formidable than the one given to Moses. And lest they (and we) melt in fear, Jesus offers the disciples the same promise that God gave to Moses, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). So, like Moses, we are not only called to a very significant yet arduous task, we are also given the gift of God’s permanent presence to protect, support and encourage us until it has been completed.

Yet, despite God’s reassuring words, Moses is not convinced. He poses a second objection to God, with two more still to follow. What I find absolutely amazing about this conversation is not so much what it says about Moses, but what it says about God. When God reveals himself to Moses, he does not overwhelm him with his holiness, but allows him the wonderful freedom to be fully human – so free, in fact, it will take everything in God’s arsenal to enlist him for his mission, and even then, God ends up with plan B instead of plan A.

The text portrays God as extremely vulnerable in his encounters with mankind. He will never coerce us to do his will, often at great pains to his own person. This conversation should serve as a model for how we ought to relate to one another, with free and open dialogue, allowing those under our charge full freedom to express differing points of view. Had Moses not had the freedom to pose his objections, he would never have learned some of the most intimate things about the heart of God. This is a good word for us. Imposing what is right at the expense of relationship is wrong. As elders, we seek to implement this by always allowing the “quiet” brothers a voice before a vote is taken. The process takes time, but it is extremely important to preserve holy relationships.

II. Moses’ Second Objection: Authority (3:13-15)

A. Moses’ Objection: Who are you? (3:13)

Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of

your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” (3:13)

Still plagued by the rejection of his countrymen, Moses feels he has no credibility with his own people. He knows they will question his authority, and therefore requests God to grant him an intimate connection to his name. In the ancient world, a messenger was sent “in the name of” the sender. As Fretheim comments, “A relationship without a name inevitably means some distance; naming the name is necessary for closeness. Naming makes true encounter and communication possible. Naming entails availability. By giving the name, God becomes accessible to people.”³

The name “God of your fathers” seems a bit too generic to Moses, so he requests that God reveal something more about his name for authorization. This would be analogous to giving a son or daughter a credit card bearing our name to make a large purchase, and finding the merchant, not satisfied with the mere possession of the name, making further inquiries as to their relationship to us to determine whether the purchase should be permitted. When Moses asks, “What is His name?” he is not asking for mere identification, but the character of God behind the name. God graciously submits to his request, with profound simplicity.

B. God’s Answer: The Revelation of the Divine Name (3:14-15)

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God, furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons 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 this is My memorial-name to all generations. (3:14-15)

This is one of the most significant and talked about texts in the Old Testament. In the Ancient Near East, gods were normally named with nouns (Baal means “master”; Shamash means “sun”; Anu means “sky”; Yam means “sea”). By their nature, nouns bring definition. You can get your mind around a noun and fully comprehend it with your imagination. But by using the verbal stem “to be,” Israel’s God defies definition. There is something totally mysterious and “other” about this God. His name indicates that he will not be confined to man’s categories, nor will he place himself at man’s disposal. He is wholly Other: “I am who I am.” Because Hebrew verb tenses do not signify time the way they do in English (past, present, or future), the name can be translated as either present, “I am who I am,” or future, “I will be who I will be.” Most modern translators prefer the latter. If that is the case, what God said is not a philosophical statement about his existence or eternal nature, but a dynamic statement about the God who makes himself known in history by faithfully fulfilling

his promises to his people. So on the one hand the name leaves Moses in the dark as to who God is, but on the other, its ambiguity invites Moses to have faith that, as history unfolds, the name will take on greater and greater significance as God is about to do a new thing. This view well fits the context of God's earlier promise that "I will be with you" to successfully complete the task. Janzen writes,

The name Yahweh (translated here as *He will be*), is clearly introduced in our text as a name so far unknown to Moses and Israel (cf. 6:3; Hos 13:4), although it refers to the same God whom they and their ancestors have worshiped. A name change is appropriate for human beings at the threshold of a significant new beginning (e.g., Jacob to Israel, Gen 32:27-28); likewise, God gives to Israel a new divine name as God begins to reveal to them his role not known to them thus far, the role of Savior/Redeemer/Liberator.⁴

This is the name that Moses is to take back to Egypt. It will be God's personal name forevermore. God's actions in the Exodus will be remembered by every generation, for in giving the name, he is committing himself to Israel's history for all time. It is not without significance that after Israel had safely crossed the Red Sea, and Pharaoh's chariots lay drowned in the midst of it, that Moses sings of God's name, imparting to it the new attribute of his character now manifest in the Exodus:

"The LORD is a warrior (lit. "a man of war");
The LORD is His name." (Exod 15:3)

The patriarchs had worshiped Yahweh, but had never experienced Yahweh as a "man of war" who would use the entire creation to fight for and redeem his people. This is a dynamic new beginning, one never to be forgotten. Isaiah would agree: "Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel" (Is 47:4). Had Moses kept silent and simply acquiesced to God's demand, without voicing his concerns, he would have never come to this new discovery. Gowen suggests, "Moses' apparently simple question, asking for a name, was thus a very profound one, for it led to the insistence that God is no 'oblong blur,' as someone claimed, but is a being with whom it is possible for humans to have a personal relationship, knowable enough that we can call him by name."⁵

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, Israel's saints would hold onto this personal name, knowing that it meant that God was intimately committed to their history. But no one could predict the new way in which he would come to save his people. When God did act, they would attach a noun to the verb to give it new definition, giving the event eternal significance for all generations. God said to Moses, "this is My memorial-name to all generations." Titles like "The LORD is My Banner" (Exod 17:15), "the LORD is Peace" (Judg 6:24), "the LORD is King" (Ps 10:6), "the LORD is my rock" (Ps 18:2), "The LORD is my shepherd" (Ps 23:1), or "The LORD

is my strength and my shield" (Ps 28:7) must never be seen as philosophical or abstract reflections about the eternal God. These statements all come out of a historical event where the God of our fathers revealed himself in a new way that the saints could not have predicted. The event provoked elation and praise, so the new "name" is memorialized forever. We often find the name appearing in the birth of children as an expression of God's faithfulness to his promises: people like Zechariah ("Yahweh has remembered"), Jonathan ("Yahweh has given"), or Joshua ("Yahweh is salvation").

This personal name Yahweh become so holy to Israel that in the post-exilic period, Jews did not pronounce it when reading the Scriptures. Instead they substituted the term *'adonai* (Lord) or *hashem* (the Name) for the divine name Yahweh. This practice continued after the birth of Christ. In the second half of the first millennium, when Hebrew fell out of common usage, Jewish scribes inserted vowels into the text (earlier the Hebrew Scriptures were written only with consonants). The vowels they inserted for the divine name YHWH were those of *'adonai* (Lord), so that the reader would still preserve the holiness of the name by reading "Lord" instead of the divine name Yahweh. Later English translators, unaware of this practice, made the mistake of opting for the hybrid "YeHoVaH," a term which we sometimes hear in old hymns. Most modern translations use the term LORD in small capitals, following the Greek translation *kurios* (Lord).

But while the Jews attempted to honor the name by restricting their pronunciation of it, the early Christians took the opposite approach. They gloried in proclaiming the name, especially as it found new meaning in the person of Jesus. In this season of Advent, I want to end my message by reflecting on the glory of Jesus' name. (I will take up Moses' further objections later.)

III. Glory in the Name

John's gospel has the most prominent use of God's personal name in the New Testament. John shapes his account around the use of God's personal name seven times, and unashamedly applies it to Jesus (John 6:35; 9:5; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). In each case he uses the verb "I am," and then attaches a noun(s) to it, giving it new meaning and definition. Did Moses give bread to Israel in the wilderness? Jesus gives the bread from heaven that gives eternal life. Was God in search of a new shepherd for Israel who would not exploit her but would sacrifice his life to feed the flock (Ezek 34)? Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Was Israel's priesthood and sacrificial system the way to God found in the Torah? Jesus opens up a new and better way. Unlike the law that brought death, Jesus by his death gives all immediate access to God, and then gives the Spirit that brings life. He is "the way, the truth and the life." Did Moses come to Egypt with ten plagues of death, culminating in the death of the

first-born? Jesus comes to Israel with seven signs of life. Instead of turning water (the Nile) into blood, he turns water into new wine. And instead of killing the first born, he raises the first born from the dead. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Was Israel once a choice vineyard that had become fruitless, producing only worthless grapes (Isa 5:1-7)? Jesus is the true vine that gives abundant fruit to all who abide in him.

God's name, that elusive "I will be what I will be," continues to become more personal, inviting and exciting in the person of Jesus. If these seven "I am" statements leave any doubt, Jesus is claiming God's personal name for himself. He removes all doubt when he comes right out and says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). We may miss the implication of that statement, but the Jews who heard him did not; they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

With this background, perhaps we can sense some of the emotion that Joseph felt when the angel came to him with the name of his future son: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:20-21). Immanuel, "God with us," would take on a new dimension never before seen in Israel's history. This new Joshua would come to save us not from Pharaoh, or from the Romans, but from our sins. The greatest tyranny in life has been brought to an end.

What does this name mean to you? Do you glory in the name? Perhaps this Christmas it would be appropriate for you as a family to continue in John's tradition and give a new name to Immanuel that reflects his personal faithfulness to you.

Candlemas

With certitude
Simeon opened
ancient arms
to infant light.
Decades
before the cross, the tomb
and the new life,
he knew
new life.
What depth
of faith he drew on,
turning illumined
towards deep night.

– Denise Levertov⁶

1. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1, HCOT* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 360.

2. Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 65.

3. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 65.

4. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 2000), 65.

5. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus*, 97.

6. Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire* (New York: New Directions Books, 1997), 11.

© 2003 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino