



June 14, 2020
Rev. Rachel Toone

Now Is the Time: Who Is This God?

Exodus 3:1-22

Well, friends. These are interesting days. We all know it, we all sense it. Though perhaps at times it's difficult to put into words. Which is why I thought you might benefit from some of the cathartic memes my college students have sent me. (Take it down Karen, Cheese grater, "My Friend!")

The fact is, all throughout history it has taken events like world pandemics (this is by no means the first one, by the way) to get people to "feel their feelings." To get them to the necessary vulnerable places to ask those bigger questions in life. Somewhere between the nerf guns and crafts and zoom calls and pity parties we start to ask, "What makes my life matter? How do I live well in this? Where is God in all this craziness?" And perhaps our biggest question is not "why" or "where," but "who" and "what." *Who is God, anyway, and what kind of God would allow such extensive suffering to go on for so long?*

These are hard, real questions. And fortunately we're not the first ones to ask them. The Bible is full of these moments, these questions - even these pandemics. Today we are going to look at a passage that gives us an up-close-and-personal view of what God is actually like, and what that has to do with us in these hard times. But before we get there, here's the back story.

We meet Moses in Exodus 2 as the cute little baby in the basket. In a few verses he grows up to be a sophisticated, well-educated, rising political star in the Egyptian government who gets caught up in a scandal. He kills somebody and has to flee from Egypt to Midian. Which means (in modern day terms) he ran away from Capitol Hill in DC to the Appalachian holler where I live (and where I have a mechanic named Goat and a neighbor named Rabbit). Moses comes to terms with his exile, so he gets married and settles down in the holler...for the next 40 years. By the time we meet Mo in chapter 3, he's an 80-year-old washout who gave up all that power, prestige, and potential to spend the rest of his life babysitting sheep for his father-in-law. Or so he thought. And that's where our story picks up.

(Exodus 3:1-12)

Moses is out with his sheep minding his own business, when he sees something real weird. My house is heated by a wood stove, and I would love to find a bush that would just keep on burning. Moses is equally curious, and moseys over to take a look – God has his attention. But once he gets close things get really crazy, and it starts with *his* name. "Moses, Moses." God says Moses' name twice, and that's actually a really big deal. Scholars call this a "repetition of

endearment” (NAC). In ancient Semitic culture, saying someone’s name twice was a way of expressing endearment, affection, and friendship. This happens all throughout the Bible – “Samuel, Samuel.” “Martha, Martha.” “Saul, Saul.” So when Moses hears his name twice, as one commentator put it he “would have understood immediately that he was being addressed by someone who loved him and was concerned about him” (NAC). From the first two words of this whole wild conversation, we learn the first important thing about what God is actually like – he cares. He starts from a place of endearment, affection, and tenderness for one particular person.

Which is good, because we learn the next really important thing about God from the next words out of his mouth – “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” God is *holy*. And his appearance here in the fire is a helpful example. If you throw a candy wrapper into a campfire, what happens? It burns. The nature of fire is to burn, and the candy wrapper just can’t stand up to the heat. That is the reality of human nature in the presence of God. God isn’t telling Moses to stay back and take off his shoes because he doesn’t want him around. He tells Moses to keep his distance because to behold the full glory of God would incinerate him. More than anything, this tender, affectionate God wants to be with his people. But at this point in the story, sin is still in the way and protective measures must be taken – and Moses gets the memo because he hides his face in verse 6.

We wouldn’t know anything about that, would we? Or maybe we do. Because we’ve spent the last two months on zoom and facetime and wearing face masks not because we want to be distant from family and friends, but because we want to be with them (I did see a guy in the grocery store wearing a batman mask, which was pretty awesome). We want to be close, but we also want to protect them from the dangerous reality of our world right now. In this period of history, we are in the zoom call phase with God. God wants to be with his people, and in many ways he is. But because of our sin and his holiness, at this stage in the game there are necessary protective barriers to God’s presence and communication. That won’t last forever – the sin quarantine does finally lift and we get to see God face to face! But that’s getting ahead of the story...

Because in the midst of the declaration of God’s holiness, we witness once again his tenderness three different times in verse 7: “I have **indeed seen** the misery of my people in Egypt. **I have heard** them crying out because of their slave drivers, and **I am concerned** about their suffering.” God sees. God hears. God cares. This magnificently holy Creator of the universe – to simply gaze upon his glory would zap us like mosquitoes – is very, very concerned about the wellbeing of this (seemingly) random people group having a hard go of it in Egypt. Holiness and tenderness – two characteristics that don’t seem to fit together at all.

But Moses still has some questions about this caring and holy God talking to him through a burning tumbleweed, which brings us to the next part of the story: **Exodus 3:13-15**.

Bear in mind, at this point in world history there were lots of gods to choose from, and as far as anybody was concerned everybody was at least a little bit right (sound familiar)? So Moses needs some clarification – “*Who am I actually talking to?*” And there’s another layer to that question, because in the ancient world names were a REALLY big deal. It wasn’t just some arbitrary label assigned to you. Your name actually embodied essential qualities about you.

Which means that Moses isn’t just looking for the “who” – the name itself. He’s also looking for the “what” – what kind of God are you? What makes you different from all the other options – from Islam, Buddhism, Post-modernism? *What are you actually like?* And that’s the question that matters, isn’t it? It’s not enough to simply believe that there may be a God out there, because that doesn’t really tell us anything. What we really need to know is if there *is* a God, what kind of God might that be? Distant? Apathetic? Angry? Vindictive? Uninvolved? Or someone entirely different from our low expectations?

And so we find ourselves at one of the most pivotal moments in the history of the world. Because God tells us what he’s like in his own words, with his own name (verse 14):

“God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

Now, to unpack the beauty in all of this you all need to become Hebrew scholars in the next five minutes. So get ready. An important thing to know about Hebrew is that it likes to play fast and loose with grammar. In fact, Hebrew doesn’t actually have tense. So sometimes, one word or phrase can hold several layers of meaning all at the same time in a way that English can’t. In this case, God’s name means both of these things, simultaneously:

“I am who I am. I will be who I will be.”

God is who is he is. The essence and author of reality itself – neither subjective nor open to interpretation. He is the Creator God – everything else is because he brought it out of nothing. God will be who he will be. He is the sustainer of all things. He does not change, he is never surprised. He rules over time – past, present, and future events – and is guiding history towards his good purposes no matter how badly humans screw it up.

Creator and sustainer. Lord of creation, Lord of history, Redeemer of both. Holy and tender. He was. He is. He is to come. He has no rival, no equal. And he WILL set his people free.

And he doesn’t stop there. God knows “I am who I am” and “I will be who I will be” don’t roll off the tongue very quickly. So in the next verse he gives us his proper name – the short version of what we just read – so we will know what to call him:

“God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘YHWH, the God of your fathers —the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob —has sent me to you.’”

In your English Bibles, verse 15 probably reads “The LORD.” That actually comes from a Jewish tradition that so respected the name of God they didn’t want to speak or write it for fear of profaning it. To play it safe, they created an alias – “LORD” – that we have used in our translations ever since.

But in Exodus 3, God isn’t asking us to play it safe! He knows your name – he’s calling it twice with tenderness, interest, and affection. And he wants you to know his. He wants us to know who he really is, what he’s really like. He wants to know us and be known by us. The sovereign Lord of the universe wants YOU to call him by his first name.

And with that revelation of who God is – holy and tender, creator and sustainer – Moses has a mission and we learn something else about God. He is the Rescuer, and Moses has a job to do.

Exodus 3:16-22

Moses is to go back to Egypt, rally the elders, and go before the most powerful man on earth and command him to let his free labor go because YHWH – the Lord God of Israel he’s probably never heard of – said so. God is well aware of how that will turn out, and this is what he is going to do about it (verse 20):

“So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.”

What are the “wonders” God is talking about? The plagues!!! Which we all have a new appreciation for, thanks to COVID. Which means we should probably ask *what is so wonderful about a plague?*

The answer to this question is so important, because it ties directly back into *who God is*. He is the Rescuer. Which means his judgment – though terrifying! – really is a wonder. Because it’s creating room for grace. It’s clearing out all the junk and the bad so redemption and good can happen.

As some of you are listening to this Exodus story, you hear yourself in the cries of the people of Israel. COVID quarantine is not a glorified staycation for you, because you have an alcoholic spouse. A mom and dad who fight all the time. You’re drowning in anxiety and depression. You are a single parent who is quickly running out of energy and options. To the sick, the desperate, the communities of color crying out for justice, hear this: I AM hears you. He sees. He knows. And he will deliver you. We don’t know why the Israelites had to wait 400 years for freedom. We don’t know why God allows suffering to take place – scripture doesn’t give us an easy answer. And we may not trust the circumstances, but can we trust his character? That’s the real question. God has promised he will make everything right again. That one day there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, because the old order of things has passed away.

And I AM asks you to trust him. Trust that he is who he says he is, he will do what he says he will do. And that he will set his people free at just the right time.

But we must each ask something of ourselves - western, American Christians. We often think of ourselves as the Israelites in the story, waiting for God's rescue. But what if we are actually Pharaoh? The one living as if we are in control? And what if this morning YHWH - the caring, holy, I AM – is calling you to let go of something? Pharaoh was the wealthiest, most powerful man in the world. Who was this God of nobody-Israel to demand that Pharaoh let his people go? **Who do you think you are, God, to demand that I give something up?** That I let go of my identity in my career, my security in my stock portfolios, my control over my children, my pleasure in pornography? That I let go of my greed, my selfishness, my temper? That I give up my money and time to actually care for the widow, the foster kid, the immigrant worker, the single mom who lives just a few blocks away? *Who do you think you are?*

Be warned, church. I AM will answer that question. I AM continues to stand up to power. Sometimes it's only when we lose things precious to us do we realize that we've been forfeiting more important things—particularly to a God we serve who says "I will not give my glory to another." We should take note that in a matter of days the NCAA, the NBA, the MLB were shut down. The DOW dropped 2000 points. Career professionals all across the country were forced into mandatory Sabbath and actually had to spend to time with their children. Literally overnight, I AM struck down the American gods of entertainment, wealth, and success. And he will strike down any idol in our culture and in our hearts that tries to compete with his glory.

Why? Because Yahweh cares about you. Because he is holy and will not be compared to other powers. He is the rescuer God who won't just deliver us from COVID – he will do whatever it takes to deliver us from ourselves.

And he already has. Because over 1000 years after the Exodus, I AM broke the quarantine himself. The same I AM who delivered the Hebrews from Pharaoh, who parted the Red Sea also walked on water. And when the disciples cried out in terror he said, "Take courage, I AM" (Mark 6:50). I AM appeared in person by another name – Jesus – which means "God saves." And when the soldiers asked for "Jesus of Nazareth" so they could arrest him, Jesus responded "I AM he." The power of those words knocked everyone to the ground, then I AM walked to the cross voluntarily to beat COVID, death, racism, injustice, Satan, and the all sin that poisons our own hearts. I AM sent his Son so we could finally see him face to face, so that when he speaks our name twice we might hear his call and look him in the eye.

Benediction:

I AM didn't rescue Israel because they were good – the rest of the OT is proof of that. He rescued them because that's who he is. That's what he does. He rescues anyone who calls upon his name. So repent and believe the good news. YHWH is God.