



Roanoke, Virginia
Confirmation Sunday
January 12, 2025

“God’s nickname”

Exodus 3:7-17

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The Hebrews are slaves and Pharaoh owns practically all of them.

Well, not Moses. Moses is a Hebrew who lives in the house of the Pharaoh who owns them all. Crazy how that happened. To save his life, baby Moses was set adrift in a basket. He was rescued and adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter.

Moses knows he is a Hebrew. Millie and I tell our daughters about the day of their birth on their birthdays so maybe Moses has been told the story of his rescue and adoption on his adoption day so he will know how wonderful Pharaoh’s family has been to him and be grateful. If that is the case, it has unintended consequences. I mean, if you have any conscience at all, how can you live in the lap of luxury knowing that so much of it comes from the enforced labor of your people?

I think Moses’ story worked on him. I think it explains why, when he sees an Egyptian brutally beating a Hebrew slave, he is sent into such a rage that he kills the attacker. Not the smartest thing to do, but he thinks he gets away with it until he hears that someone spotted him and word is getting around. “*Moses killed an Egyptian. Yeah, that Moses. Pharaoh’s Moses.*” Moses sees what is coming and decides to flee to the only place where nobody knows his name to spread. He flees into the wilderness where a somebody can become a nobody. He tried to do too much; now he wants to do nothing. Moses becomes a shepherd. Sheep don’t gossip. Sheep don’t kill.

What a shock it is, then, when he sees something strange and hears something stranger. He sees a bush burning but not burning up. He hears a voice speaking from the flames, calling his name, “**Moses, Moses.**” Somebody has found him! And then the voice identifies itself not with a



name but by shared relationships with his people: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” In other words, “I am the God of *Hebrews*. I am your God, and I am the God of slaves.”

The voice continues:

⁷ “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, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹² [God] 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 serve God on this mountain.”

¹³ 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?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, 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.

¹⁶ “Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. ¹⁷ I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

The Word of the Lord! (*Thanks be to God!*)

The Word of the Lord and the *grace of God*.

The grace of God is the central theological affirmation of Presbyterians. We so believe that the grace of God is all that is needed for our salvation that we Presbyterians brazenly say to the world, “**Hey, watch this!**”, and then we baptize babies. Watch how Rev. Ben Brannan baptizes a baby on February 16. He will hold a months old child in his arms- a child who is not able to feed herself, change herself... not able to clothe, house or protect herself. Ben will declare that this utterly vulnerable baby is already claimed and redeemed by God.

I hope you are in church on February 16 to see it and I hope you don’t miss a very important moment in the baptism. Ben will ask the parents, Brian and Olivia Harris, “**By what name do you declare this child’s identity in Christ?**” And they will answer by saying “**Annabelle Lane.**” They will speak her specific name because Annabelle has a specific identity that sets her apart from other children who have been baptized in this church; children like Wallace Calder,



Aubrey Grace, James Alan, Howard James. Then when Brian and Olivia take Annabelle home, they will take with them *a baptismal certificate* with her name on it and *an Infant Bible* with her name in it.

Annabelle's baptism will happen then, not today. Today is Confirmation Sunday. You confirmands who are sitting in front of me were baptized years ago, most as babies. If your baptism was about God's freely given grace, your confirmation today is about you responding to that grace. It is about you making a profession of faith and promising to be a part of the life and witness of Christ's church.

I brought up your baptism because I want to make a point again about names. Your specific names matter, because your specific identity and calling as a Christian matters.

- Your names are in the bulletin,
- they will be called out during the Service of Confirmation,
- they will be spoken in the Confirmation Prayer,
- and when you go home, you will carry with you yet
 - *another certificate* with your name *on* it
 - and *another Bible* with your name *in* it.

The Christian faith is *all about names*. Our faith is not a philosophy. It emerged from history. It is about stories and relationships and that means names are important. That's a problem for me because I am bad with names and that's not good for a Christian minister, but that's the way it is with the Christian faith. Names matter in our faith.

God knows each of us by name... which is to say that God knows what makes you "you" and knows what makes me "me." I hope you understand that. I hope you understand that you specifically matter to God for specific reasons. And, because you're making promises today about how you will live, I hope you understand that you matter specifically to the world because you are going to have a specific impact on it. The good that you do, and the harm you do- to yourselves, to others, and to the world- is very specific to who you have been, who you are, and who you will become.

Understanding that can be overwhelming at times. Sometimes, you're tempted to run off into some wilderness where nobody is going to call your name to do something that will cost you. But that voice has a way of calling your name even when you're hiding.

Yes, in the Christian faith, your name matters. And God's name matters. We

- *pray* in the name of,
- *make oaths* in the name of,
- *call* on the name of,
- and *make declarations* in the name of... God.

God's name matters.



And that's an odd thing to say because we Christians *don't know God's name*. Not God's real name. I mean, God's name is not "God."

- Hey preacher, is your name "Preacher?"
- Hey organist, is your name "Organist?"
- Hey usher, is your name "Usher?"
- Hey God, is your name "God?"

We don't know God's name, we only know God's *nicknames*. And God has a lot of nicknames for the same reasons we have nicknames.

A nickname can come of a relationship. My nickname for Jane Hays Andreson is "Mom" because that is what she has been to me. God has relationship nicknames: "Father," "Master" "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Sometimes nicknames have to do with a specific experience of someone. My parents gave their daughter Ruth the nickname "Scotty" because they experienced her birth in Scotland. God has nicknames that come from how God has been experienced: "The God who Sees," is what the slave girl called God because when she was abandoned in the wilderness, no one was there to help her... except God. You are the God who sees... me!" "The God who heals," and "The God who provides" are two other biblical examples.

Sometimes nicknames comes of what one does. Calamity Jane and Ivan the Terrible were known for causing calamity and doing terrible things. In the Bible, God has been called Creator, Judge, Savior, Shepherd, Redeemer.

The passage I read from Exodus 3 is about one of God's nicknames. There is only one problem with this one. I am going to give you confirmands one more assignment to illustrate what the problem is. I will spell the name for you and then I want you to say it. Here it is: YHWH. Say that name without using vowels.

(Oh dear. Cleanup in Aisle 1!)

The original Hebrew Scriptures didn't have vowels and the reader had to add them. They knew what to do because Jewish tradition instructed them how to do it. But the tradition refused to add vowels to this name to emphasize both the intimacy and the distance of the relationship one can have with God. God calls Moses by name (that's intimacy), but then says, "**Don't come any closer** (that's distance)."

The distance defines the intimacy. I called my mother "Mom" and not her formal name because I needed to remember that she was the parent and I was not. The intimacy was in the fact that no one else called her Mom but me and my siblings.

After your examination by the session, I told you that because confirmation symbolizes a move from the faith of a child to the faith of an adult that you could now call me "George" instead of "Dr. Anderson." I mean, some of you were calling me "George" anyway because our culture doesn't take titles as seriously as it used to.

That's OK, cultural practices change. But without pressing the point or asking that things be different, I would like to speak to why it used to be so important for a child to use title and last



names when referring to adults because it speaks to the intimacy and boundary of God's nickname. To use titles in referring to adults: "Mr.," "Miss," "Mrs." "Dr." "Ms" showed respect to the adult. But even more, it safeguarded the child. There was intimacy because each adult had a name to be called. But there was a boundary because the adult needed to stay on the adult side of the line so the child could remain a child on the child's side of the line.¹

Moses, having been called by name by the voice of the burning bush, asks God, "What is your name?" He wants that intimacy we all want with God. God responds with a nickname that is hard to say and hard to translate. It can mean, "I Am Who I Am," or even better, "I Am Who is Present."

God is saying to Moses, "I am present with you here in the wilderness. Even though you ran away, I am here with you. I call your name because you matter to me and because I need you." Moses ran from his family and he ran from his people, but in hearing his name he is reminded that he is a child of God and he is called to live like it. "You need to return to your family- Pharaoh's family- and you need to return to your people- the Hebrews. I see the oppression of the Hebrews by your family and I need you to tell your family to let your people go."

In the Confirmation service, your name will be called because we want you to know that God is with you. When you feel abandoned, forgotten, unwanted or unloved, God is present with you. And... when you *want* to be forgotten and unnoticed, when you are trying to escape the sometimes-overwhelming responsibility of being a good, decent, truthful, and kind person, God will be present with you then too. When you have to stand up to your friends, your tribe, your family, your country on behalf of those who are not treating you well, God will be present then too. God will call your name, and your conscience will hear it.

That's how it is with our faith. Names matter. God's not giving you God's formal name to set a boundary. But God sees you specifically and calls your name. And God sees the plight and knows the names of those who are hurting, in need, or being oppressed, and God wants you to see them and know their names too.

So, we will call your names. Accept God's gracious presence..., and hear God's call for you to be a gracious presence in this world.

¹ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, BakerAcademic, 2019, p. 243.

