

**“God Begins Where Words End”**  
**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. 2 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. 3 Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” 4 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.” 5 Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 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.*

*7 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, 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 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. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send 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 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.”*

*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.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

"What is your name?" It seems like such a simple question. But names in the ancient world mattered. They defined the person. They told a person's story. Moses means to draw out of the water, reminding us of both how he was saved as an infant, and how he would save his own people from Egypt. Israel means one who wrestles with God. Isaac means laughter, because his mother laughed at God's incredible promise. Names also were used to control people. If you could call out their name or invoke their name, often they would have to do what you wanted them to do.

When Moses asks for God's name, he isn't doing it lightly. He is hoping to fully understand and define God. He is hoping to figure out how to fully explain and describe God to others.

But God doesn't fit into our neat and tidy boxes. God isn't a being who can be controlled or manipulated or even defined by

us. God is too big, too vast, too creative, and too surprising for all that.

So God says back to Moses, “I am who I am.” That phrase, “I am who I am” in Hebrew is often translated as “Yahweh.” You may have also heard it Latinized as “Jehovah.” That at least are the four consonants: YHWH. But we really don’t know the correct pronunciation of this phrase or of God’s name. One reason is that ancient Hebrew didn’t have vowels, only consonants. The second reason is that in Jewish tradition, God’s name is not ever spoken. They might write down the four letters: YHWH. But never, ever speak the name Yahweh. Because that name is more than what we can know. Because God is bigger than any word we can say. Because in saying the name we might try to use God for our own purposes or manipulate God for our own desires. And God cannot be contained. God will not be manipulated or used by us.

Even the translation we get here, “I am who I am” is too specific about God. Almost every translation turns these words of God into present tense. But in Hebrew, they also could be past tense and future tense. The great “I am who I am” is also the great “I was who I was” and the great “I will be who I will be.”

God is somehow all at once, present, past, and future. God both transcends our time and is active and alive in it. God both is fully present in that burning bush on Mt. Horeb three thousand years ago, but also present with us here in Virginia today. The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said this about the God of Moses: “God begins where words end.”

That is because God is still active in our world. God is still alive. God is still creative and caring and loving and merciful. And God still wants to surprise us all.

I grew up thinking of God as the watchmaker version of God. God created everything, set it in motion, and then went away. That's the same view of God Thomas Jefferson and a number of the first political leaders of America had of God. It made God something rational and easy to be understood. But it also kept God distant and away from our world and our lives.

That's the version of God I had in my mind until one summer at camp. There, for the first time I opened the gospels and found there a savior who didn't fit my expectations or anyone else's. I met a God who was willing to take on human flesh, breathe and eat, serve and suffer, love and care, and even die as one of us. I met a God who didn't follow religion or political powers, but instead always cared for those who were forgotten, ignored, or looked down upon. That same week I remember kayaking around a lake and on the far edge meeting God in that water. Not as something that could be fully seen or heard or even described. But instead as this overwhelming joy and peace. And a knowledge that I was not now, nor ever would be again, alone.

"I am who I am" "I was who I was." "I will be who I will be."

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and Hannah and Naomi. The God who is Creator of the Universe, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit of wind and fire is not a God who fits into our expectations. Instead, this is a God who will surprise us. This is a God who will call us to do things we never thought we could do. This is a God who will overthrow empires, and lift up the lowly. This is a God who will show us

joy and peace in ways we can't even describe. This is a God who will walk by our side and give us strength, but will also flip our ideas of the world upside down. This is the God of the burning bush. YHWH.

So today, I want us to take a few minutes and reflect on these two questions:

1. As a child, what was your idea of God like? Did you think God was like a judge? A watchmaker? A Santa Clause? A rule taskmaster? Or something else?
2. How has your understanding of God changed since then? How has God surprised you and shown you something new?