

Name Calling

When we catch back up with the biblical story this morning, much has happened. After Jacob hobbles on his way with more stagger than swagger, he becomes the father of sons who will be fathers themselves, the heads of Israel's twelve tribes. One of those sons is Joseph, of course, the mouthy and adored favorite with a fancy coat. Joseph has the audacity to share his visions with his brothers, visions that seem to indicate that they will at some point bow before him. They're not thrilled with this scenario, so they try to do away with him and he winds up being sold and enslaved in Egypt. His visions lead Joseph to rise in Pharaoh's favor. He foresees a devastating famine and helps Pharaoh plan ahead, thus saving Egypt as well as his own family. As one scholar mentioned this past week, "Egypt is Egypt because of Joseph."¹ [Read Exodus 1:8-14]

I'm guessing it has always been the case in human history the world over, but at least in my experience, baby naming in the southern US rivals the most rigorous Olympic sport. We work arduously to connect our children with their family and to help them forge an identity of their own. I grew up in a family full of women named Eleanor. At one point I confronted my parents because I felt I had gotten the short end of the stick with a name that sounded a bit like Eleanor but was only five letters long with two measly syllables. They smiled sweetly and said that they wanted me to have a name that was all my own and that was connected to both sides of the family. There was an Ellen Crawford back there somewhere on my dad's side and my mom was somehow distantly related to Ellen Douglas, one of the main characters in Sir Walter Scott's poem entitled "The Lady of the Lake." They added an s to the end of Douglas so that my middle name matched my great grandmother's maiden name. That's a lot for twenty-one letters and six syllables to carry, but it is a bit more graceful on the tongue than Do-Flo, the nickname they came up with had they decided to name me after two of their beloved grandmothers, Doris and Florence. Yes, blessedly *Ellen* it was and *Ellen* it shall be.

¹ https://youtu.be/jRZFppAKAkY?si=pTqNSFh_cHVW105o

It is striking that Pharaoh does not know Joseph's name. Because of Joseph, Egypt is saved. And because of Joseph, the Hebrews are saved as well, thriving and growing into not simply a few children of Jacob's sons, but a people great in number, just as God had promised Abraham generations before. And this frightens Pharaoh. He convinces himself that the people who had at one time been the source of Egypt's saving grace are now a threat. His plan to crush them with harsh treatment and hard labor only serves to help them grow in number. He decides to have the male children killed at birth, enlisting midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Scripture tells us that these two women resist, and the Hebrews continue to grow in number. When Pharaoh orders that the people take it upon themselves to kill the boy children, we are told of a mother who hides her baby boy in a basket, praying that the little ark will float him to safety. He is rescued and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, who names him Moses, not for anyone in particular but because she drew him out of the water. Moses is raised as a royal and then flees to the wilderness after killing an Egyptian guard who had been beating an enslaved Hebrew. [Read Exodus 2:23-3:15]

Moses is a bit hesitant, to say the least. When a bush bursts into flame while he is out minding his own business, he turns aside, he turns away. *This is not for me*, this shepherd formerly known as (an Egyptian) prince seems to say. And then God calls his name, "Moses, Moses." I imagine Moses looking around and wondering, "Who? Me?" But he's the only human for miles, so yes, God is calling him. God knows his name, and God knows what God wants Moses to do, what God needs Moses to do. One would think that God could just intervene directly and set things straight, and yet, that is not how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob chooses to operate. Instead, God enlists ordinary human beings to participate in God's work of saving and redeeming the world.

Moses hems and haws a bit and then asks:

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?²

² Exodus 3: 13, NRSV

I love that Moses begins with *If*. From the get-go, he is negotiating with God. That alone is a gutsy move, but then he has the nerve to ask God's name. And God answers: "I AM WHO I AM." If you read along in your pew bible, you notice that the words are in all caps. It's not that God is yelling the name. Instead, the translators want to be very clear that this name is something extraordinary, a name beyond all other names, a name that speaks to God's being wholly other. Our Jewish siblings will usually say "The Lord" or "Ha Shem" which means "the name" in Hebrew to avoid saying God's name aloud. Tradition has many names for the one God, of course, and yet this is the name God gives Godself, so it is a name unlike all the rest.

When my friends and I were having children, I remember someone suggesting that it might be a good idea to practice saying possible names out loud, to listen for how the name sounded when we called her inside for dinner or when she was in trouble—middle name included of course. It never dawned on us to listen for how it would sound when God called out to her. I'm not sure Moses could have imagined how his name sounded in God's voice before he stood in his bare feet in front of those mesmerizing flames. And yet, when God calls, Moses seems to know that his life will never be the same.

Today marks the beginning of our annual stewardship campaign. In the next week or so, you will receive a letter and a pledge card inviting you to prayerfully consider how to respond with your gifts in the coming year. As you pray and wonder and think about how you might commit some of your hard-earned treasure to the work of God in and through this community in 2024, I would love for you to pause first and think how your name sounds in God's voice. Maybe you will hear God call much as a beloved teacher or coach who waves enthusiastically from across the room, remembering you as a student and glowing with pride over how you have turned out. Maybe God says your name with the voice of a devoted grandmother as she draws you in for a bear hug. Maybe God says your name like a friend you haven't seen for decades with a mix of giggles and tears. Or maybe God's voice sounds like a parent who calls to you with a fierce love born of long nights of teething and at least a few missed curfews.

Make no mistake. On this day when we celebrate our connection in Christ with siblings around the world, there is work to do on the other side of the globe and in our own backyard. There is peace to be waged;

there are children to be housed and fed; there are divisions to be healed; there are communities to be repaired and relationships to be rebuilt. But first, before we even begin to listen for *what* God might be calling to us to do or be or give, I want us to listen first for *how* God calls. For just a moment, close your eyes. Listen for the love and the power as God calls your name. Instead of “Moses, Moses,” hear God call your name, not once but twice. [Pause]

God is calling each and every one of us. It may be quieter than a whisper, and the voice may not come from a flaming shrub in your backyard. But God is calling you and me and them, not because we have done everything just so. Moses is on the run when God calls. He is on Pharaoh’s most wanted list and doing his best to lay low and hide. And yet Moses is the very one God needs to do this work, so God calls him, by name. And God calls us, too. God knows our names and God has holy and life-giving work for each of us and all of us to do in and for God’s embattled and beloved world.

Moses goes on to play a pivotal role in the life of the Hebrew people of course. He will confront Pharaoh and lead the people through the wilderness, to the very cusp of the Promised Land. All because the Name above all names chooses to call Moses’ name and promises to be with him through it all. That’s the catch of course. Moses does not prevail because Moses has magic powers or the perfect name. Moses prevails not because of who he is but because of who God is: I AM WHO I AM. Moses is able to answer God’s call because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is and always will be. God cannot be contained. God cannot be defeated. And this God promises to be with Moses and with us, always. No matter who we are. No matter what name we carry, the great I AM who calls to us promises to carry us, too. Always.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.