



SUNDAY
JUNE 4
9:30AM

Trinity
Sunday

WHAT IS GOD'S NAME?

“What is God’s Name?”
June 4, 2023 | Trinity Sunday
Charlie Berthoud | Exodus 3:7-15

Since today is Trinity Sunday, we are having a Bible quiz, with three questions. The sermon title is question number two.

Question 1: What is generally considered to be the most important event in Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament?

You could make a good argument for Creation or the Ten Commandments, but most biblical scholars say that the most important event in the OT is the Exodus, when the Hebrew people were saved from slavery and oppression in Egypt, with Moses leading them to the Promised Land.

In this foundational event of our faith, we see a God who cares about people who suffer, a God who calls people to action, a God whose desire is salvation—salvation which comes through Moses who leads the people to new life.

Christians also experience God’s salvation and new life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the one who saves us from sin and death, from foolishness and selfishness, from indifference and from sleep-walking through life.

God acts to save the people through Moses and through Jesus.

Our reading today is when God calls Moses to this work of salvation. As we turn to the reading from Exodus chapter 3, some context and background is important.

- In the prior chapter, God called Moses from the burning bush. Moses felt unsure and unqualified, but God was persistent, trusting that Moses could do the job. This is one of many call stories in the Bible, where God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

- Right away in the reading, we notice that God sees the suffering of the people, and God acts. God sees and God cares very much about life for us right here right now. Remember Jesus teaches us to pray: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth.
- The story suggests that neither God nor Moses can save the people alone. They need each other. God doesn't act unilaterally, God needs ordinary people like Moses to do great things.
- God sends Moses to speak boldly to Pharaoh, the political and military power of the day, calling for freedom and justice. So right from the foundational story, God's people are very involved in the realities of daily life, even getting involved in politics if you will.
- Moses had asked Who am I? Then he asks God, who are you? Identity is important.

Listen for God's word...

⁷Then 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, ⁸and 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. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He 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."

¹³But 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?" ¹⁴God 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.' " ¹⁵God 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.

Question 2 is also one of the absolute **best** church jokes ever. Are you ready?

On the ride home from church, a dad asks his daughter, “How was Sunday School? What did you learn?”

She replied, “We learned God’s name.”

Dad says, “Really? What is it?”

“Howard,” says the girl.

“Howard?” asks Dad.

“Yeah,” says the girl. “You know, ‘Our Father who art in heaven, HOWARD be thy name.’”

Aren’t you glad you came to church today?

I don’t seriously think God’s name is Howard, but I do think Trinity Sunday is a good day for us to think about what God’s name is, and it’s a good day for us to think about who God is.

Moses asks God what God’s name is, and God answers with the rather cryptic “I am who I am.” What kind of answer is that?

Fortunately for us, the rest of the Bible gives a variety of answers to the question, with many different names for God and man different descriptions of God.

For Christians, we’ve understood God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity was established at the Council of Nicaea in the early 4th century. That understanding of God is made clear in the end of Matthew’s gospel, a reading that we will hear next week with a baptism.

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of **the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” -Matthew 28:18-20

If you're in your 50s or older like I am, and if you grew up in the church, you probably **only** heard Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to describe God.

But thanks to some really good biblical scholarship and some wise theological reflection, the church has come to realize that there are many names for God and many ways to understand God.

One of the first reformations of the classic formulation of Father, Son, Holy Spirit was **Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer**.

It makes sense, as we can understand God the Father as Creator, God the Son as Redeemer, and God the Spirit as Sustainer.

One of the biggest insights is recognizing that God is not an old white man in a robe. In several places the Bible refers to God with feminine imagery, so many Christians have moved away from exclusively using male pronouns about God.

The reflections on the name and nature of God continued and about in 2006, the Presbyterian Church approved a study paper called "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" which pointed out the abundant variety of names and imagery for God in the Bible.

The graphic reflects some of this language:



Some of the more engaging Trinitarian conceptions are:

Lover, Beloved, Love
Speaker, Word, Breath
Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River

I included this graphic in our weekly CONNECTIONS email. If you're not getting that email and want to get on the list, email the church office.

I also included some of the text from a wonderful hymn about God, in Trinitarian fashion. It's number 11 in the hymnal, and It's filled with imagery for God.

Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud,
Fortress, Fountain, Shelter, Light,
Judge, Defender, Mercy, Might

Word and Wisdom, Root and Vine,
Shepherd, Savior, Servant, Lamb,
Well and Water, Bread and Wine

Storm and Stillness, Breath and Dove,
Thunder, Tempest, Whirlwind, Fire,
Comfort, Counselor, Presence, Love

From "Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud" by Thomas Troeger
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These newer formulations for God may seem odd to us, but they are biblically grounded, and they are expansive, reminding us to keep an open mind, to keep growing as God's people.

So **Question 3** of the Bible quiz: Which one of these names or images for God do you want to grab onto this week?

Maybe you need to think about God as fortress or fountain.

Or as root or vine. Or as comfort or counselor.

I invite you to pick one or two of these words or phrases and ponder them for the week—to help you grow closer to God.

The process of thinking in new ways about God reminds us of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation, words in the Book of Order, our Presbyterian constitution:

The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, in Latin, which means: “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God.”

We are in continual reformation, always open to new things for God to show us. We need to keep thinking in new ways about God, about ourselves, about the church, about the world. We need to have some openness and humility so that we can learn new things.

We’ve made pretty good progress in a lot of areas. For the most part, we no longer think of Blacks, or women, or left-handed people, or lesbians and gays as second-class citizens or as inferior in God’s eyes.

We’re slowly moving in that same direction with our collective understanding of gender and sexual identity, as we learn about transgender and non-binary people. As I’ve mentioned previously, I’m in the process of learning about these things. With June being PRIDE month, it’s a good time for all of us to learn.

I follow the Madison Police Department on Facebook, and I was glad to see what they posted this week, as PRIDE month begins. The rainbow logo says “Policing with Pride.”



However, reading through the comments on the MPD-PRIDE post, many were derogatory and hateful; so we have work to do.

On the Happy to Be Presbyterian Facebook page, I saw a post this week about a church in a community with unfortunate hostility to LGBTQ people. They put up a sign that says “Jesus Welcomed Everyone: So do we.”



The person who made the post wrote:

We have been quietly open and affirming for a few years now. Today we decided to be a little more noticeable. Forgive me, but I'm proud of my church.

The bottom line here is that we need to be open to learning new things.

- We've learned new names and new images for God, which make our faith deeper and richer, helping us to experience God in new ways.
- We're learning to accept each other in all our wonderful diversity, which makes our world more loving and joyful.

If we can't think in new ways, we'll be in trouble.



One more thought. Two weeks ago in the sermon and the weekly email I mentioned a book called Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future. I've shared the first chapter with Elders which led to good discussion.

A member of the church—who says they are older than Joe Biden—saw that I mentioned the book, so they bought a copy because they care about the church. They enjoyed it and gave me their copy with note including this:

I enjoyed the book but I'm not applying for the Associate Pastor opening. Please pass to a church leader that needs help to understand that change is needed.

Our life is not static, our faith is not static, our church is not static.

We have to keep listening for God and listening to the world around us, so that we can keep learning about the wonderful love of God, and we have to keep finding way to live, to make it real.

Let us pray...