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Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b and Exodus 3:1-15

What's in a Name? Past, Present, and Future

When we last met Moses, his Hebrew mother Jochebed who had raised him as a child, had brought him to Pharaoh's daughter to be raised as a member of the royal household. As Bible commentator Judy Fentress-Williams notes, "Moses is a child of two houses, two religions, two cultures, and two competing identities. The tension between these two worlds comes to a head in verse 11 (of chapter 2)."¹ So we hear that as an adult Moses sees an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew worker and kills the Egyptian in anger. When Pharaoh finds out about the killing, he tries to kill Moses, forcing Moses to run away to the land of Midian. While in Midian, Moses marries Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro. Chapter 2 ends with these words: "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help rose up to God from their slavery. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." We pick up the story here in Exodus Chapter 3, verses 1-15:

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 Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. 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. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." 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." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God 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.

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

¹ Judy Fentress-Williams. Exodus Commentary. *The Westminster Study Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2024; p.86

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 your God's name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." God said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' " 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. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

The SMÅGÖRA bookshelf was the first IKEA product I assembled by myself. No longer living with roommates, I was a full-fledged adult, well actually a post-doc, living on my own in Denver. I had gone on an IKEA spree over the Christmas holiday when visiting my family in Maryland, just prior to moving across the country. My dad helped with the drive and had returned home, with my assurances that I was fine to assemble the bookshelf myself. After all, I had learned a lot of handy skills working in a lab on my dissertation research, back in the days when you couldn't just purchase pre-made equipment for everything. Well, nobody told that to the SMÅGÖRA. It required holding pieces together while you inserted screws and that required far more acrobatic skills than I was capable of. In a moment of ingenuity, or maybe frustration, I took a hammer and just hammered the screws in places. Voila - I had a brand new set of shelves to place my priceless artifacts on. Well actually, it held my telephone and answering machine, because this was the 1990's. I really couldn't put anything fragile on the shelves, because they had a rather pronounced lean to them from my exquisite hammering skills. I'll never forget the first time Brian visited me in Denver and saw the shelves. He offered to fix them for me, that is, until he realized that I had hammered in the screws. You can guess who assembles the furniture in our house today.

I hadn't thought about those shelves in many years, they got ditched when I moved from Denver, until I read NY Times Reporter Melissa Kirch's weekly *Good List* ², where she references building IKEA furniture as Legos for adults (although many including me would quibble with this) and she includes a link to an article about how products at IKEA get their names. To Americans it can seem that IKEA products are just a random assortment of letters - mostly consonants - that are impossible to pronounce. Well, what's in a name? It turns out that IKEA's product names are not random. Ingvar Kamprad founded IKEA in 1943, at age 17. Even the company name is a kind of shorthand: his initials plus the family farm, Elmtaryd, and the nearby village, Agunnaryd. Kamprad struggled to remember numerical product codes, so he came up with an alternative naming system: beds took Norwegian place names, rugs took Danish ones, sofas took Swedish place names, and bookcases took men's names (I'm still waiting to meet a SMÅGÖRA) and so on. As reporter Mal James notes, "Seen that way, the system does the same job the numbers were meant to do, just through a different

² Melissa Kirsch. *The Good List*. August 26, 2026. Online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/26/briefing/the-good-list-dolly-kermit-pelagic.html>

door. Instead of memorizing an arbitrary product code, the names give products a more memorable identity. A memory aid dressed up as branding.”³

And 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 if they ask me, ‘What is your God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” .” God said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’ ” 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.” Well friends, I think the Lord God may give IKEA a run for the money in terms of a memorable identity and a memory aid. “I am who I am.” Or an alternate translation of the Hebrew is “I will be who I will be.”⁴

Now this is the not the first time the Lord God has interacted with people. All through the texts in Genesis from the creation story through the journeys of the ancestors – of the extended families of Abraham and Sarah - the Lord God is interacting with the people, making covenants and blessings, giving them new names, showing them when they have strayed from the paths God intended, and moving them toward reconciliation. And yet at this time and place, God chooses to give Moses a name that he can use to vouch for his credentials as the one called to lead the people out of oppression in Egypt.

When I have preached or taught on this passage in the past, I have often focused on the mechanics of the naming of God, the four letters in the Hebrew known as the tetragrammaton – the first letters of the verbal phrase translated as “I am who I am.” By Jewish tradition this name is too holy to pronounce or write, so the scribes wrote the four letters without any vowels: YHWH. Vocally it was replaced in rituals by the Hebrew word *Adonai* (“My Lord”), which was translated as *Kyrios* (“Lord”) in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. The tetragrammaton became the artificial Latinized name Jehovah (JeHoWaH). For those interested in the mechanics, that was your little tutorial. However, as I was preparing for today’s message, I was struck more by the **intent** of God’s communication with us than I was by the specifics of how we are to refer to God by name. God intended for a present reciprocal relationship with Moses, as God had with Abraham and the ancestors in the past, and God intends for a reciprocal relationship for generations to come.

As I share in the words of preparation in the bulletin from Biblical scholar Terrence Fretheim, “The statement that this is to be God’s name for all time makes two points: it speaks not only of what the people are to do, but also of a divine commitment to being a part of this people’s history... Giving the name entails a certain kind of relationship; it opens up the possibility of,

³ Mal James. Scandinavia Standard <https://www.scandinaviastandard.com/m-ikeas-product-names-are-not-random-whimsy-its-founder-was-dyslexic-and-struggled-to-remember-numerical-product-codes-so-beds-took-norwegian-place-names-rugs-took-danish-ones-and-bookcas/>

⁴ Judy Fentress-Williams. Exodus Commentary. *The Westminster Study Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2024; p.87

indeed admits a desire for, a certain intimacy in relationship. Naming makes true encounter and communication possible. Naming entails availability.”⁵ Fretheim details how this accessibility means that God and the people can meet one another. And how this naming can also be seen as act of vulnerability. The Lord God opens up to those who call on and call out God’s name. The Lord God acknowledges that very exposure, saying to Moses: “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, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”

And God responded. We heard in the words that Aaron read from Psalm 105: “Remember the wonderful works God has done, God’s miracles and the judgments uttered. O, offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, the Lord’s chosen ones. ... The Lord sent his servant Moses and Aaron, whom he had chosen. Praise the Lord!”

God heard the cry of the Hebrew people who were being oppressed in Moses’ day. God hears our cries today: the cries of those displaced who are treated without dignity in a new homeland; the cries of those suffering from disasters like the horrific floods this week in Nepal; the cries of those needing deliverance from illness and addictions and loneliness and fears and anxieties; the cries of injustice and prejudice and lack of mercy.

The Apostle Paul tells us that as a follower of Jesus we are to “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in afflictions, persevere in prayer. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

And just as God responded to Moses when Moses asked, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” saying, “I will be with you,” God says the same to us today. God says to us, “**I am** with you as you seek to heal the sufferings in this world, as you seek to be agents of grace and mercy and reconciliation.” And God says to us, “**I will** be with you through all the days of your life. Through the afflictions and persecutions, through the weeping and the rejoicing.”

I don’t know what tomorrow holds or the next day or the next, but God will be God regardless. What’s in a name? The Lord God said to Moses, “This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.” The past, the present and the future. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Dr. Terrence E. Fretheim, in *Exodus. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*; Westminster John Knox; 2010, p65.