

**Today our focus is on the Second Commandment**, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” (Exodus 20:7) This wording is from the NRSV. The more familiar wording of taking the LORD’s name “in vain” comes from the KJV. Here “vain” suggests lightly, carelessly, without proper respect. The original target of the commandment was likely the misuse of God’s name in oaths and in various kinds of magic or divination. Despite popular perceptions, it probably had little or nothing to do with swearing or profanity. About that, at least, generations of sailors need not have worried.

The idea of God having a name is not unusual in either the past or the present. Monotheistic religions developed the practice of using the generic word god (lower case) as the name of God (capitalized). This is true for all the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In our ignorance, we sometimes think Islam has a different god than ours: Allah. But in Arabic this is simply the word for God. Thus, in an Arabic Christian Bible, what in English is rendered “God” is rendered there as “Allah.” In polytheistic traditions, however, the various divine entities are identified with separate names. That’s what names are for, enabling us to distinguish one individual from another.

The same was true, of course, in the ancient world and this is evident in the Bible. The prophets rail against Israel’s worship of other gods, with the Canaanite god Baal being the one most often condemned. Yet there are multiple names used for Israel’s God also, which we typically just look past. The two used most often are, in Hebrew, Elohim and Yahweh. Following Jewish practice, in English Bibles the first is usually translated as “God” (capitalized). The second is rendered as “LORD” (all caps), reflecting the belief that, out of reverence for God’s name, Yahweh should never be spoken but “LORD” substituted for it.

Many Bible scholars believe these were originally the names for two gods of different tribes that came together as the people of Israel. In the merger, the names of their gods were also merged as two ways of speaking of the one, true God. This may be one purpose of today’s first reading from Exodus 3. Moses knows he’s talking to a god but which one? Who should he say he is representing when he goes back to Egypt to free the Israelites? From what he is told we are to deduce that Elohim/God and Yahweh/the LORD are one and the same.

Something else, however, seems to be going on in this story. God’s first response to Moses is to say, “I am what I am,” which can also be translated as “I will be what I will be.” This reflects the similarity in Hebrew between the name Yahweh (YHWH) and the verb “to be” (hyh). Then, almost facetiously, God tells Moses, “Tell them, ‘I AM has sent me to you’.” Only in his third reply does God explicitly say to tell the Israelites that Yahweh/the LORD, the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is coming to their rescue.

God seems to be playing with Moses here, which reflects a biblical tradition of God’s reluctance to be identified. In the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling at night with “a man” at the river Jabbok, as dawn approaches and the man is about to leave, he refuses Jacob’s request to be identified. “Why do you want to know?” the man asks. Instead, he blesses Jacob and gives him a new name, Israel. Yet it’s obvious who Jacob thinks this is when he says afterward, “I have seen God face to face.”

“What’s in a name?” Juliet asks during her balcony soliloquy, dismissing the fact that her new love Romeo is a Montague, blood rivals of her family, the Capulets. “A rose by any other name is but a rose.” She soon finds, tragically, that sometimes there’s a lot in a name. Knowing a person’s name creates a relationship. When you’re addressed by name, it conveys at least a minimal level of intimacy. You’ve been noticed. Perhaps that person cares about me—but perhaps not.

Knowing a name can also convey some power to manipulate or control. Children can cruelly abuse another child’s name by bullying. Identity theft has become a thriving criminal industry. More positively, when I was a substitute high school teacher, I quickly learned the value of knowing students’ names and got in the practice of immediately made a seating chart for every class. “Bill, stop talking” carried more authority than “Hey you, in the blue shirt.” Knowing names created order.

It could be said that the question of the identity of God hangs over the whole Bible. Wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes wonder skeptically if humans can ever understand God. The judgment of the prophets is also bleak: people do not know God. In addition to condemning Israel’s following other gods, the prophets also charge Israel with unfaithfulness to God’s will. Their abuse of the poor and powerless disgraces God’s name among their neighbors. Today, abuses by the church, and extreme cultural and political views espoused by the church, are some of the most common reasons given by people for not believing in God. “If that’s your idea of god, I want no part of it.”

Here we begin to understand God’s seeming reluctance in the Bible to be identified. “Why do you want to know?” God asks Jacob skeptically. Just tell them I AM sent you, God tells Moses. Perhaps God doesn’t really want his name associated with this crew. We all know what “name dropping” is about. We all know the perils of guilt by association. Yes, even God has a reputation to defend.

If there is one fault that has characterized the monotheistic religions, it has been a careless disregard for using God’s name. Generations of pastors, preachers, priests, and popes have claimed to know what God has commanded, promised, declared, and revealed. For centuries God has been claimed to support one side or the other of conflicts involving religions,

war, politics, and culture. And countless holy men and women have claimed to know that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, prosperous, and successful—and that God has revealed to them the secrets to acquiring these things.

The dramatic abandonment of religion by millions of people today may indicate we have reached a tipping point in people's tolerance for such "God abuse." More positively, it may also indicate we are recognizing that this is no way to talk about God, that we have been misunderstanding God all this time. We may, then, be ready to hear a voice of deep wisdom in these ancient stories which says that, in fact, God has no name but rather, as Moses learns, God simply "is."

Then what can we say about God? The first thing, and perhaps the hardest thing, for 21<sup>st</sup> century people to hear is that we have NO control over God. The Bible seems to understand that our desire to know God's name is ultimately self-serving. Knowing God's name means we can think, "I have your number." But no, we don't. We can't manipulate God. We can't figure God out. We can't beg, plead, or bribe God into doing what we want. And hearing that, our honest response is, "Then what good is God?" And with that our ego is suddenly revealed, asking its perennial question: "What's in this for me?"

But asked about God, it's a meaningless question. It's like asking, what good is time or gravity? God "does not exist" as a thing among other things. God is not a being to be named but "the ground of being," as theologians have said. "I am what I am, I will be what I will be" God tells Moses. Speaking of the Athenians' "unknown god", Paul says that God is the one in whom "we live and move and have our being." There is no place where God is not. All reality is in God and God fills its every space.

God, in short, is everywhere. And thus, all reality, all existence, is filled with meaning, filled with value, and filled with marvelous joy. At this very moment, God is in the person next to you—and God is in the pew you're sitting on. God is in the singing birds I hear in my backyard each morning, in the wind and waves of our beaches, and in the sunrise and the sunset. God is in storms and earthquakes, birth and death, silence and noisy crowds, atoms splitting, cells dividing, and stars exploding—the simplest realities and the most profound mysteries.

Is God a person? No, since God is not a thing or being, needing a name to distinguish it/him/her from other things or beings. But God is personal, profoundly so, indeed more personal than any of us can know. This is the meaning and significance of Jesus. For God is most fully revealed and most fully experienced in human love.

This is why Jesus says the greatest commandment has two parts and yet is only one commandment: Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Loving our neighbor is the same as loving God. God is not more present in the person next to you than God is in the pew you're sitting on. But God is more fully experienced in our interactions with that person than in our "interaction" with the pew.

And so, coming full circle, it turns out we do have names for God: they are Fred and Sue, Bill and Margaret, and the names of any person present to us, whenever and wherever that may be. So, we are commanded to treat these names, and the persons they represent, as holy things, as sacred, as beings in whom God is present, for us. Jesus is unique in the quality of his life, but we discover in him is that what he is, is a revelation of who we all are, bearers of the face of God and, yes, the name of God.

In today's Gospel from Matthew, Jesus makes his most explicit statement about what gets people into heaven or hell: recognizing him in our neighbor. Divided like sheep and goats, people go to heaven because of their compassion for Jesus and to hell due to their ignoring him. Surprised, both groups ask, when did this happen? In as much as you did or did not care for these, my sisters and brothers, Jesus says, you did or didn't do it to me.

Today it is becoming increasingly clear that the fate of the world is hanging in a balance. The abuse of the earth and its inhabitants is reaching such a level that we are on the verge of making this planetary home of ours uninhabitable. Our ability to work together is being continually degraded by our dehumanizing of so many that share this planet with us, seen mostly recently in the barbaric treatment of immigrant refugee families at our borders.

The world cries out for us to open our eyes and our hearts to recognize the sacredness, the holiness, the divine presence that surrounds us in every place and that lives in every person. Here, in this place, here, in this person, is where we encounter the mystery, the wonder, the joy, and the love of God. The Hindi greeting "Namaste" means the sacred in me bows to the sacred in you. "Take off your shoes, Moses," God says. "You are standing on holy ground." Today our life depends, as it has always depended, on recognizing and embracing the presence of God in our world and in our daily life. We honor God's name by honoring the fullness of God's creation in which we live. To do so, as Jesus says, may God bless us all with eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen

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