

Naming God  
Genesis 14:17 – 24, 16:1 – 16; Exodus 3:1 – 15  
Sunday, September 29, 2019

Three weeks ago, I was flying back from Kansas City. I went to the airport, checked in, and started going through the security line. There is a point where, before you go through the metal detectors, you have to show your boarding pass and ID to a person sitting at this little desk. They look at it, scan it, and you move along. So I gave my boarding pass and ID to the woman sitting there. She looked at it and saw my name, “Patrick Wayne Marshall.” She said, “Patrick Wayne...just like John Wayne’s son!” I looked at her and said, “You are exactly right! Two weeks before I was born, my mom had a girl’s name picked out but no boy’s name. She said that she did not want to go to the hospital without a boy’s name, so one night she and my father were watching *Circus of the Stars* on tv, and the host was John Wayne’s son Patrick Wayne. *Her* father’s middle name was Wayne, and she said, ‘Patrick Wayne...I really like that!’ And that’s how I got my name, but you are the first person to ever *know* that!” She handed my documents back to me, smiled, and said, “Have a nice flight, Patrick Wayne!” And I felt *so good* because somebody *knew my name*. Not just what my name *was*; plenty of people know that. She *knew* my name. She *got* it. It was like she *understood* me.

When we were going through the process of adopting our son Brandon, he already had a Korean name. Normally, when babies are being given up for adoption in Korea, the baby will be born, and the nurse will take it away and give it a name; the birth mothers don’t usually *name* babies that they are not keeping. But in Brandon’s case, his birth mother *did* give him a name. She named him Hye-seong, which in Korean means, “holy wisdom.” Well, when Jen and I heard that, we thought, “We *have* to keep that name!” Not only did his birth mother give it to him, which was really unusual, but the *meaning* was just so significant. So we kept it as his middle name – Brandon Hye-Seong Marshall. It was only later that I found out that Hye-Seong is *also*

the name of South Korea's version of Brad Pitt. So did his birth mother name him after *holy wisdom*, or did she name him after this very handsome actor and model?

Names have *meaning* to us. Maybe not in the *literal* sense. There's a scene in the movie *Pulp Fiction* where Bruce Willis is in a taxicab, and he's talking with the driver. She's this beautiful Colombian woman, and he looks at her license on the dashboard and sees her name. He says, "Esmerelda Villalobos. That's a very pretty name." She says, "It means, 'Esmerelda of the wolves.'" He says, "That's a heck of a name you got there." She says, "Thank you. What is *your* name?" He says, "Butch." She says, "*Butch*. What does it mean?" He says, "I'm American, honey, our names don't mean anything." My name – Patrick Wayne Marshall – doesn't *mean* anything, really. But the *story* has meaning to me. Brandon's name means something, but the story behind it *also* holds deep meaning for us. Our names have *meaning* to us. And part of understanding *us* is understanding our *names*.

*God's* name has meaning. And part of understanding *God* is understanding *God's name*. So that's what we're going to be looking at this morning. And the *reason* I've been thinking about this lately is because about a month ago, I saw something on Twitter. A pastor from Puerto Rico named Carlos Rodriguez wrote, "The first person in scripture to name God is Hagar. A woman. Single mother. Egyptian slave. She says, 'I have seen the one who sees me.' God has a way of exalting the vulnerable."<sup>1</sup> I read that and thought, "Wow, that's great. I hadn't thought of that before. I wonder if it's true." So I started digging around in my Bible.

The story he's talking about is in Genesis 16. Abram's wife Sarai cannot have children. So she said to Abram, "Take my servant-girl Hagar, so that at least *she* can give you an heir." She *does*,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/HappySonship/status/1167423808090845188>

but then Sarai gets jealous and sends her away. Hagar runs off into the wilderness and sits down by a spring of water. An angel of the Lord comes to her, blesses her, and sends her back to Abram and Sarai. Then it says, “So she *named* the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’” *El-roi* is Hebrew for, “God of seeing,” or, “God who sees.” But here’s the thing: Hagar was *not* actually the first person to name God.

If we look back to chapter 14, Abram leads an army into battle to rescue his nephew Lot, who had been taken prisoner. Abram *wins* the battle, and when he does, King Melchizedek of Salem brings him bread and wine as a thank you for defeating these other neighboring kings who were Melchizedek’s enemies. Salem is what they called Jerusalem before the people of Israel lived there. So Melchizedek is the Canaanite king of Jerusalem; he is *not* Jewish. But he *blesses* Abram and says to him, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” So he *names* God there as *God Most High*, which in Hebrew is, “El Elyon.” So technically, King Melchizedek is the first person in scripture to name God.

But here’s the thing about *that*. Like I said, King Melchizedek wasn’t Jewish. He didn’t *know* Abram’s god. *God Most High* was the name of a god that the *Canaanites* worshipped. So Melchizedek is saying, “The god who gave you victory in battle must be the god that *we* know as El Elyon, God Most High.” So he doesn’t actually know God’s name. He’s just relating Abram’s god to a god that he already knows. And *Hagar* does the same thing. She names God *El-roi*, but scholars say that *El-roi* was the name of the god that was already associated with the spring of water where the angel came to her. So she is saying, “The God who saved me must be

like *that* god.” She’s relating the God of Israel to another god, but she doesn’t actually know God’s name.

So we can’t say that *either* of these were the first instances of naming God. These were people just trying to *understand* God; trying to *relate* God to something they already knew. But right after this story of Hagar, at the beginning of chapter 17 it says, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.’” When God says *God Almighty*, it is the Hebrew name *El Shaddai*. It literally means, “God of the Mountains.” This is how the people of Israel referred to God for hundreds of years until the time of Moses. *El Shaddai*. *This* is the first time that God is named in scripture. And God is not *given* a name by a person. God *reveals* God’s name. “You all are giving me names, trying to relate me to these other gods. But *here* is who I am.”

So the people of Israel knew God as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, for hundreds of years, through the time that they were slaves in Egypt. One day Moses – who was a Hebrew by birth, but he was raised as an Egyptian, so he did not *know* the God of Israel, he only knew *of* the God of Israel, had *heard* about this God from the Hebrew slaves – Moses encounters God in the form of a burning bush. And God says to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...I have heard the cries of my people, and I have come down to deliver them...I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.” Moses goes back and forth with God on this and says, “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?” *I don’t even know your name*. And God says to Moses, “*I am who I am*. You shall say to the Israelites, ‘*I am* has sent me to you.’”

That phrase – *I am* – is a form of the Hebrew verb, “to be.” Biblical Hebrew did not use vowels, so all we have are consonants, Y-H-W-H, and the best guess we have as to what that name sounds like is *Yahweh*. (You might be more familiar with the Latin pronunciation of it, *Jehovah*.) So again, God reveals God’s name to God’s people, and what God essentially says is, “I transcend names and titles. I am very being itself.” There’s an old Jewish tradition that the sound of God’s name – Yahweh – is the sound of *breathing*. *Yah* (breathe out), *weh* (breathe in). So the name of God is the sound of life itself.

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Now, here’s why I think this is interesting and important for us. God is not *named* until the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, when Melchizedek and Abram refer to God Most High. It takes *fourteen chapters* to get a name. What did people *call God* before *that*? How did they *talk* to God? All up to this point, it had been *direct conversation*. When people talked to God, it was simply, “You.” (If they talked at all. Sometimes they just *listened* and *did* what God said to them. Noah never says one word to God. God does all the talking, and Noah simply does what God says.) But when Adam talked to God, it was, “You.” When Cain talked to God, it was, “You.” Direct conversation with God that reflects an intimate, personal relationship.

But then people start *naming* God; giving God *titles* that *describe* God. See, that’s the thing, when Melchizedek and Hagar refer to God, they aren’t using God’s *name*, they are using *titles* that *describe* God – adjectives. It’s like if you’re really tall, instead of calling you by your name, someone just calls you Stretch. Or if you have red hair and they just call you Red. I used to know a man named George, and George always called people, “Partner.” He called *me* partner a lot of times. It was really folksy and familiar, but what I found out was that, “Partner” was what George called you when he couldn’t remember your name. It has the *feel* of intimacy, but it’s not really *personal*, is it?

There is a sense in which, when people started *naming* God like that, it served to *distance* them from God. Instead of a direct conversation with, “You,” God became *other*. I mean, what would our prayer lives look like if instead of, “O Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, God of grace and glory,” we simply said, “*You*.” It’s the difference between talking *about* God and talking *to* God. What if instead of having to call on the name of the Lord to invoke the presence of God, we just started *talking* because we trust that God is *right here with us, always*.

When people started using *adjectives* to describe and name God, it took away that intimacy and direct knowledge of God. And so God comes to Moses and says, “*I am*. I transcend description. Don’t just know *about* me. Know *me*.”

I think about what this means, not just for our relationship with *God*, but for our relationships with *each other*. The other day I saw a tweet by Pope Francis, and he said, “Let us learn to call people by their name, as the Lord does with us, and to give up using adjectives.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of, “He’s liberal/conservative,” “He’s *Bill*.” Instead of, “She’s Catholic or Jewish or Muslim,” “She’s Miriam.” Instead of referring to people as *poor* or *homeless* or *illegal* or *special* (or worse), do we know their *names*? Because adjectives serve to *distance* and make people *other*. But to call someone by their name, to be called by *your* name, is intimate and personal, and it makes it harder to objectify them. Don’t just know *about* them. Know *them*.

God, in the ultimate act of self-disclosure, came to us with the name *Jesus*. That’s the English version of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means, “God saves.” God came near to us, became one of us, not just so we would know *about* God, but so we could *know God*, intimately and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1176458759549227009>

personally. And that intimate knowledge of God is what saves us. Maybe if we can come near to each other, to those who currently seem *distant* and *other*, and not just know *about* them but actually *know* them, call them by name, maybe *that*, in such a polarized and divided world, will be what saves us.