

The God who sees and hears¹

Exodus 3:7-14

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⁷Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

¹³Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers 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".

For the existence of Israel and the Church, these verses about how God saved the abused Israelites from Egypt, have always been considered foundational. No wonder - this is a prime moment in Israel's existence: God revealed his 'name' to the nation and to the world.

But what a strange name! It seems that God tries to avoid the issue; he does not reveal a proper name, but a description of who he is. 'Call me Yahweh', he answered: 'I am who I am'. If anyone asked a Jew, 'what is the name of your God?', the answer was: 'I am who I am.'

¹ This article has liberally used ideas from a sermon by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, preached in Spring 1973. This sermon was published in German in 1976, and recently in English. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *The God of Jesus Christ: Mediations on the Triune God* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1976, 2008), pp. 15-25.

This name indicates how majestically different he is from the gods of the nations; God transcends them all. He *is*. He is not someone outdated from a distant past, an origin of existence who is absent now. God created the world, he is present in the world, and even after this world, he is still there. He is present in every moment, superior to time itself. This should save us from the idol worship of all things new and modern; time is not God. He is always present, transcending time.

This meeting of Moses with the Creator also reveals show *in what manner* God is present in each moment. He is the one who is *seeing* and *hearing*. Throughout antiquity the gods has always been envisioned as seeing and hearing, but they were not able to *always* see everything, as they were subject to time. Their interest was also different from what God was interested in; they led their frivolous lives on the Olympic heights, and if they were interest in humankind, then mostly in the powerful, the beautiful, the wealthy.

'I am who I am' is unique; he always sees and hears those who are afflicted, suffering, weak, and without hope. God is the protector of the rights of the people. He protects the powerless against the mighty. This is the true face of God, revealed again and again in the history of Israel, and culminating in the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ. One reason why the Sabbath was so important in Israel was that it ensured the freedom and equality of all people, at least one day each week. In this sacred time, God showed Israel his interest in supporting those who need a break.

Man is in a state of being-seen. Man is known. There is no definite hiddenness. Our life is open, at any moment in time, to God who sees and hears. The writer of Psalm 139 knew about this being-seen:

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

³You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

⁷Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

For people who know the character of God, as the one who is always present to defend the weak, his seeing and hearing is not something to be feared, but it is a cause of celebration. That is why the Psalmist invited God to see and hear him even more:

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
²⁴And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

Is this sense of being-seen the basis for our faith in God? Those who believe in him, find in his seeing and hearing great comfort, because he is the God who cares for people. By knowing that there is an all-seeing God, who cares for the poor and destitute, the suffering and the weak, all people are assured that they need not be lonely. Their creator is near and ready to sustain them.

Some people find this concept of being-seen so distasteful that they reject the belief in God altogether. They experience the idea of God as restrictive to their freedom, and a hindrance for their free development. These people want to remain 'unseen' and 'alone'. It seems clear, in any case, that the question about the existence of God can never be separated from who he is. The image of God that people have seems decisive for their choice to acknowledge him, or not. This also suggests that the idea of theoretical 'proofs of God's existence' is not very useful. Our philosophical choices find their source to a large extent in our heart, not in the mind.

To know God as the one who cares and who is always present, man needs time apart, and space apart, from the common life. In order for Israel to know God, he instituted the Sabbath, and also the Temple worship. In sacred time and space, he could be found as the caring and forgiving God. 'There is no experience of God unless one goes out from the business of everyday living and accepts the confrontation with the

power of solicitude', Pope Benedict XVI commented on this passage of Exodus 3.²

The event of Gods 'name-giving' in Exodus 3 has been inexhaustible. The history of Israel has centered on this name of God, and eventually, Jesus Christ confessed his identity to be that of the God of Israel. He repeated the 'I am' seven times in the Gospel of John as an indicator of his own nature.³ It may not have been altogether coincidental that when Jesus began to speak of himself as the 'I am', the nation of Israel had stopped using that name for God. Out of reference for him, they never pronounced the name Yahweh, 'I am who I am'.

Jesus, however, said that he had come to make the name of God known to the people.⁴ There is no indication whatsoever that he introduced the term Yahweh again; what he meant, was that he himself was the revelation of the name of God. 'He does not bring some new word as God's name; he does more than this, since he himself is the face of God. He himself is the name of God. In him, we can address God as "you", as person, as heart', according to Pope Benedict XVI.⁵

In this regard it is interesting to consider that Jesus invited people in need of rest, to come to him. With Mathew 11:28, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest', Jesus places himself squarely in place of the Sabbath as the manner to find God, concludes the Jewish theologian and rabbi Jacob Neusner in his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal, 2000). Jesus also spoke of the tearing down of the physical Temple in Jerusalem, and that the Temple of his body would rise in three days after he is would be killed. Jesus is the space and the time where God is to be found as the eternal benefactor of humankind.

Interesting is, that in the final book of the Bible, the ultimate enemy of God, 'the Beast', does not have a name but a number, 666. He is a number who makes people into numbers, cogs in a machine. Man is reduced to function, nothing more. Is this not a great danger in our society, where, for instance, personnel in companies are formally called 'human

² Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 21.

³ John 6:48, 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25; 14:6, 15:1.

⁴ See for instance John 17.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 24.

resources', and where so much in social life revolves are our station in life and 'what we do', instead of whom we are?

God, however, has a name, Jesus Christ, and he calls people by their name. He has a face, Jesus Christ, and he seeks our face. He is a person with interest in us as persons. And as we saw in Exodus 3, and in the life of Jesus Christ, he seeks exactly those who in modern society have no value, no function. Jesus' name, in Hebrew, combines the name of Yahweh with the concept of salvation. He is the face of the saving God. To always be seen and heard by such God is pure joy. To know such a God, is eternity.