

What's in a name

Exodus 3.1-15

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The past few months I have spend some time in researching the family line of my mother. Her family name is Lips. That is probably a contraction of a name like Lippens. But the name Lips goes far back in Brabant.

The furthest back I was able to trace the family line, was to a man called Rombout Lips. Buried in Bavel beside Breda. It felt so interesting to trace back my family to about 1390. That is 19 generations back.

Then it dawned on me last week - I am a bit slow - what a totally useless and male-oriented effort this was of me. Because my mother had 2 parents. They had 4 parents, those 4 parents had 8 parents, and if I trace this back for 19 generations, I will find hundreds of thousands of forefathers.

The story of Moses today is also about a name. He wants to know the name of God.

1. Impossible to see God

Today we find Moses alone in the desert of Sinai. Well, he was there with his sheep. There is no better proof that he rejected the culture of Egypt and embraced the culture of his Hebrew forefathers. Because for Egyptians, shepherding a flock of sheep was seen as very humiliating.

Unexpectedly, Moses is confronted by God. The story we have read is a bit ambivalent about who Moses meets, because he saw fire, and in that fire the Angel of God, and then we read of Moses being addressed by God Himself.

So what is going on? Yes, it is God himself. But actually, we all know - no-one is able to face God and live. Moses meets with God but in the form of something humans can interact with. A messenger. But still, God. Our language, or maybe our imagination, is not very helpful here.

But the appearance of God was so powerful that Moses had to look away. It was too much for him.

In Egypt, Moses was used to being surrounded by the gods of Egypt. There were statues everywhere. Those were easy to look at. They were nice, colourful, handmade. Manageable.



As we also have a tendency to made our God sort of manageable. We like to handle the divinity.

I do not want to be too negative about this. It is normal. If you think and talk about God, if you pray to God, you need something in your mind.

But the first law given by God to Moses was: do not make an image of God to bow down for it.

And this even has to do with mental images. We are always tempted to make God more knowable that he is. St Paul writes to Timothy: "God lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see."

As soon as you describe God, or imagine God in his being, you limit Him. You put Him in a box. But He is not limited. He is eternal. He encompasses our reality.

In spite of that, this God interacts with humans. He is not silent. All people can know of his grandeur in general, by looking at creation. But He also interacts in a more personal way.

When St Paul speaks to the Greek philosophers in Athens, he says this:

God is actually not far from each one of us, for
'in him we live and move and have our being'
as even some of your own poets have said,
'For we are indeed his offspring.'
Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

This summarises very well the ambivalence. God is close to us. He is not far. But we cannot express who He is in an image, whether that is an image of stone or a mental picture.

He is very unimaginable. And at the same time He is closer to you than you are to yourself. We must always maintain this tension in our faith in God. He is close to you, but you cannot put him in a box.

God is unknowable, but He makes Himself known, and He does this to Moses in a very tangible way. He gives Moses a job to do.

Moses has to go back to Egypt; he has to meet with Pharaoh; he has to liberate the children of Jacob out of Egypt.

What would your response be? 'Fine God, I'm on the way.'

Moses response is: 'Who am I?' That's normal.

And he says to God: 'And who you! What's your name!'

Moses wants a name. A definition. Clarity.



'God, if I go to my people in Egypt, they will want to know who You are. What's your name? Please, be a bit more precise.'

The Egyptians had over 2000 gods. With statues, with names, with clarity.

The question of Moses is reasonable in that context. But when it come to defining the God of heaven and earth, there is immediate pushback.

2. Impossible to define God

When Moses insists to know the name of God, because he does not know God well, God says: 'My name is Jahweh.'

Israel has treated that name as a proper name for God.

'Egyptians have their Hapi, god of the Nile, and the Germans have Wodan, and the Greeks have Aphrodite, and the Romans have Mercurius, and many others.... But we, Israelites, we have our Jahweh.'

Jews never mention that name, they say it is too holy too mention, but it is not very revolutionary or new to say that it is in fact not a real name at all. It is much more a description that a name.

Moses asks God: 'Who am I, I cannot do this job', and Moses says, 'at least give me your name, something I can take to the Israelites, something clear.'

But basically God does not seem to give a name: It is as if He is irritated and says, 'Who cares who you, Moses are, and who cares about what name you give to Me. Why do you want a name, just accept that "I am who I am"'.

This is sort of the meaning of Jahweh. So it is in fact not a name, but a description.

Why does God not want to be 'named'?

A proper name for God would suggest that He is limited. You can point at Him and say: 'That's Him. There. In that corner.'

And if you can put God in that mental box, you can then also manipulate Him. He can be handled. Just as the Egyptians did with their gods through magical rites. But those rites could only work if you had a name to work with.

Our God is far above this, and cannot be manipulated to do what we want.

And actually, He does not need to be manipulated to help us. Because his proximity to us, the fact that He is so close to you, is not a random act of God - it is his nature.

God says to Moses: 'Who cares about my name. I am God! The only one! All things that exist, exist because of me!'

Church Father Hilary of Poitiers (300-368) wrote:

I was filled with admiration at such a clear definition of God, which spoke of the incomprehensible nature, in language most suitable to our human understanding. It is known that there is nothing more characteristic of God than to be. (On the Trinity 1.5)

But there is a debate among biblical scholars: does the name indeed point to the eternal being of God? That is rather philosophical.

Many scholars, Jewish scholars included, think it is not so much a general description of God's eternal being, but much more a description of God being present with us.

Everett Fox, a Jewish translator of the book of Exodus, suggest that Jahweh means: 'I will be there.'

This is very much in line with the fact that the Bible does not speak about the being of God, about his essence, but much more about his actions. About God existing for you. And acting for you.

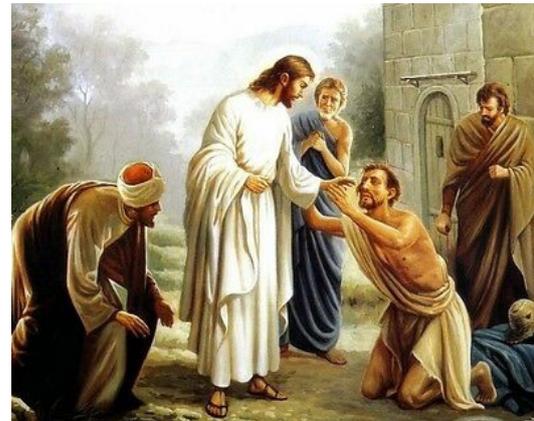
You are worried about what God asks you to do? You think you are not competent? You are afraid? I am Jahweh. I will be there. With you.

3. The God who acts for his people

The name Jahweh must be seen in the context of the need of Moses and of Israel.

Israel is crying out in its need, for help. And God then reveals Himself as the One who is eternally there. This shows his character of covenantal care. God is who He is, always near to us, to sustain us and to bless us.

Do not try to imagine God in his essence. See Him in his actions.



He is the God who descends when his people are in need.

See how beautiful, how poetically, God describes his action for his people:

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people.” Take note that God says: ‘my people’. He cares for them.

“I have heard their cry.” Your prayers are not wasted. God hears.

“I know their sufferings”. He knows what goes on in our lives. And his knowledge is not knowledge of bare facts. It is the knowledge of the One who has been there; Who shares the pain.

“i have come down to deliver and to bring them to a good land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”

If like Moses you ask yourself: 'Who am I....' then my advise is, do not overthink. Your name does not define you. Your past sins do not define you. Your wrong choices today or tomorrow do not define you.

The most defining thing for you and me, is that God cares for you. That may not answer all personal questions, not at all. But it does define who you are.

When God's people are in need, when you are in need,

He sees.

He hears.

He knows.

He comes.

And just as God was once known as the God of the covenant with Abraham and his family, he is now known as our God.

The name Jahweh is not used in the New Testament. Only in the book of Revelation we hear echoes of that name - as four time the Hallelujah sounds in Revelation.

And that word mean: Hallel, praise, to Jah - a contraction of Jahweh.

Conclusion

So what is the name of our God?

We cannot define Him; we cannot give a definition of his being. But we speak about our God as He reveals Himself, in his actions full of love and justice and goodness.

His name is: The One who is present; the One who comes to help you.

And He came to our aid most sublimely in Jesus Christ. The Word has become flesh and lived among us. This was truly God coming down to deliver us.

And since the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we know God as the Father of Jesus Christ.

And as He is the Father of Jesus Christ, He is also the Father of the people of Jesus Christ. Of us who worship here today in this church.

God's wants to be remembered throughout all generation as the God who is present. Think of Emmanuel: God with us. Jesus Christ.

He sees.

He hears.

He knows.

He comes.

For you.

+Amen