

Psalm 119:33-48

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
³⁹ Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
⁴⁰ See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

⁴¹ Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord,
your salvation according to your promise.
⁴² Then I shall have an answer for those who taunt me,
for I trust in your word.
⁴³ Do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth,
for my hope is in your ordinances.
⁴⁴ I will keep your law continually,
for ever and ever.
⁴⁵ I shall walk at liberty,
for I have sought your precepts.
⁴⁶ I will also speak of your decrees before kings,
and shall not be put to shame;
⁴⁷ I find my delight in your commandments,
because I love them.
⁴⁸ I revere your commandments, which I love,
and I will meditate on your statutes.

Exodus 20:4-6

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who

reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Exodus 3:1-15

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 Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There 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. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When 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.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He 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.

⁷ 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, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from 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 country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He 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 worship God on this mountain.'

¹³ 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 his name?" what shall I say to them?' ¹⁴God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." ' ¹⁵God 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 for ever, and this my title for all generations.

¹⁶Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt.

Sermon

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there lived a poor farmer and his daughter. One day, while he was out tilling his field, the farmer saw a great

procession of people approaching. Much to his surprise, the King and his companions slowed and stopped, asking the poor farmer if he would share a drink from his well. Now, of course, the farmer obliged, and while fetching the water, he and the King got into a conversation. Being but a poor pauper, the farmer was overwhelmed to find himself speaking with the King, and before he could even think about the words coming out of his mouth, the farmer heard himself claim that his daughter was gifted with a magical skill: turning straw into gold. The King naturally both curious and a bit skeptical, so he invited the farmer and his daughter up to the castle, for a little demonstration.

Feeling they had no other choice, the farmer and his daughter went to the castle, where the King promptly locked the girl in a round room with no windows, a great pile of straw, and a spinning wheel. As he locked the door, the King warned her that if this great pile of straw was not turned to gold when he returned in the morning, she would pay with her life.

With the slam of the great, wooden door echoing in her ears, the daughter began to cry. She had no such magical ability, of course, and was terrified of what the morning would hold, when the King opened the door and found nothing but straw before him. Now, as she sat and cried she heard a small 'pop,' and in the middle of the room appeared a tiny man with a pointy nose. "Why are you crying, miss?" he asked with a hint of anticipation. The girl explained her situation through piteous sobs, and when she had finished, the little man simply smiled. "My dear child, I will spin this straw to gold for you!" the tiny man promised, "if you have something for me in return!" The girl begged him to help, but she had no items of worth to offer, and so he refused.

As she began to sob, the tiny man with his pointy nose looked at her slyly and said, "well, there is one thing you could give me." "Yes, anything!" she cried. "Your first born child," he said. She immediately agreed, being a young girl, to whom things such as children were outside her realm of understanding. The man began to spin, and the next morning the King found the gold, and in keeping his word, he not only spared her life, but he married the farmer's daughter, believing she would make him the wealthiest man in the land.

Now, many years passed, and the daughter and the King were very happy together, despite his initially poor treatment of her. In time, they came to expect a child, and could not have been more pleased. One day, a few weeks after the birth of the child, the tiny man appeared again, demanding that the baby be given to him. The mother refused, crying and sobbing. The tiny man reminded her of their bargain, but relented slightly and offered her a new deal. "If you can guess my name in three days' time," he said, "then you may keep your child." The woman agreed, and immediately began guessing every name she could think of, "Melchezadek, Fritz, Balthazar..." none of which were correct. After the tiny man left, the queen called a messenger to her quarters and told him to go out into the country and search for the tiny man, to try and find his name. The messenger left with his mission.

The second night went much the same as the first, names upon names upon names, but none of them was the right one.

As the third night approached, the queen considered running away with her child, but she knew the tiny man would only come after her. Just as she was

about to give into despair, the messenger burst through the doors, saying, “Your majesty, I have it! I came upon a tiny little man with a pointed nose in the hills, dancing around a fire. He was singing this song, ‘Today I’ll bake; tomorrow I’ll brew, Then I’ll fetch the queen’s new child, It is good that no one knows, Rumpelstiltskin is my name.’”

When the tiny man arrived that night, the queen began her guessing, “Is it Matthew?” she said. “Ho Ho!” laughed the man, “It is not!” “How about Lucas?” she questioned. “Wrong again!” he shouted. “Then, what about Rumpelstiltskin?” she posited. The tiny man’s laughter caught in his throat. “What did you say?” he asked. “Rumpelstiltskin” she said. The tiny man pounded the floor in fury, grabbed his left foot, and ripped himself in two. And that was the end of Rumpelstiltskin.

When we were children, the story of Rumpelstiltskin taught us many lessons. Of course, the first lesson is that the Brothers Grimm had a rather violent streak, what other children’s stories end with enraged magicians ripping themselves in two? But more importantly, the story of Rumpelstiltskin is a story about the power of names. In this story, the queen is able to control and manipulate, and ultimately destroy, Rumpelstiltskin because she knows his name. And this is not a trait we see only in fairy tales. At my grade school, we seemed to go through a phase where everyone wanted to know what their name meant, where it came from, and we all liked to think that our name had something to say about us. I loved that my name, Kelly, meant “warrior,” and of course we all made fun of Calvin, whose name meant “little bald one.” In the Bible, names are particularly important. Take, for example, Isaac, whose

name means “God has brought laughter to me.” Sarah named her son Isaac, laughter, because it seemed laughable that she bore a son when she was over 90 years old. In the book of Ruth, the mother-in-law character changes her name from Naomi, which means “pleasant” to Mara, which means “bitter,” after her husband and sons die, because she believed God had dealt bitterly with her. Names, whether in fairy tales, school yards, or the Bible, names have power. With a name, we can identify someone, understand them, and ultimately, names allow us to objectify, in both positive and negative ways.

And, so, we can understand Moses’ question in the story this morning. There he is, standing in front of a bush, which is on fire, but not actually burning up, barefoot, because the bush has told him that he is on holy ground. This burning bush then claims to be God, and not just any God, but a God who will lead the thousands of Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, where they have been enslaved for hundreds of years. It’s a God who is asking Moses, who is currently a lone shepherd in the middle of nowhere, to be the leader of this nation. Now, Moses is a practical guy. He says to the bush, ok, say I believe you. Say you’re the God who is going to lead us out of slavery. Now, when I go to the people, they’re going to ask me who you are. After all, we’re in Egypt and there are a lot of gods floating around. So, who are you? What’s your name? Whom shall I say is sending me?

We can almost imagine the bush, flashing with a bit of anger, rustling its leaves in indignation, “Go ahead and tell them “I AM” has sent you.” “I AM who I AM.” Contrary to what Moses might have hoped for, God does not give him a name, a noun. Nouns give a label to people, places, or things. That is the

baptismal font. This is the pulpit. John is sitting over there. All nouns are names, and they help us quantify, organize, and understand something. We can almost think of nouns as buckets, we can take something unknown, look at it, describe it, and fit it into a bucket. A bonobo is a monkey. A Pekinese is a dog.

But, as Moses comes to learn, God is not an object to be organized, quantified, and understood. God is not a noun, but is instead a verb, "I AM." "I am" comes from the verb "to be." And "To Be" is a verb we use constantly. Am, is, was, were, will be, has been, could be, should be...all of these are versions of the verb "to be." So, "to be" is quite the opposite of a noun, which help us to understand and quantify, the verb "to be" creates almost limitless possibilities for how it can be used and understood. "To be" can be used in the past, present, or future tense, it can be used with any combination of nouns and other verbs. It's perhaps the most flexible and limitless word in the English, or Hebrew language! Part of what God is telling Moses in giving him the word "I AM" rather than a good-old proper name like "Zeus" or "Ra," in this God is telling Moses, you cannot reduce and understand me with a single name. You cannot control or explain me with a title. I AM WHO I AM. I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. This is a God who is present, but who is wild and beyond our attempts to understand and box in and fit into a bucket we can comprehend.

Now, you might be wondering, what all of this has to do with the second commandment, "You shall have no idols before me," and I think it has everything to do with idols. See, we're warned against idols for a reason. Idols are attractive. They're easy and understandable. There's something

much easier about going on a Sunday morning to the temple of Zeus, pouring out a bottle of wine at the feet of the statue, and leaving, knowing that we have satisfied the great god Zeus. When Moses was up on the mountain for many days, the people of Israel found it simpler to melt down their gold and build a golden calf to worship, rather than to try to please some invisible and unknown God. You can touch a golden calf. You can bow down before a stone goddess, you can name Zeus and understand that he controls lightning. There are specific idols for specific prayers and purposes.

And this isn't just an ancient trait. Of course. Whether it's education or wealth, our occupations or our family connections, our friends and social networks, or money...there's a lot of places we seek comfort, refuge, safety, and ultimately security. When we trust our retirement savings more than we even think about the role of God in providing for us, that is, in its own way, a modern idolatry.

It's hard, because we do not serve a God of easy answers. A lifeless statue who simply needs wine and grapes and our democrat or republican votes in order to be happy. We serve a God who is the great "I AM." Our God is, our God was, and our God will be, and while this raises all sorts of questions about what it means to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God, and whether or not "pleasing" God is actually, ultimately necessary.

I think in this moment, God knows that Moses, the Israelites, and indeed we are looking for some way, small or large to at least partially comprehend who God is, to understand just a little. After all, it's a most human of all traits to

seek to understand the things which are around us. So, after God tells Moses this great mystery, "I AM WHO I AM," God follows up by reminding Moses, I am the God of your family. I was there with Abraham and Sarah, I was present with Hagar and Ishmael. I knew and loved Isaac and Rebecca throughout their whole lives. I watched over Jacob and Rachel, sweet, lonely Leah and her many sons, Bilhah and Zilpha and the children they bore to Jacob. I was with your family in the past, and I am with you today. I am the God of your family. God is offering us a hand, opening up a whole way of imaging who God is for us.

When we are tempted to simplify God, with a golden calf or a vote for the political leader we're just certain will save us or seeking out a name like the queen in Rumpelstiltskin, we are invited, not to reduce God, but instead to remember back to the story God has been telling all along. To know who God is for us by looking and remembering who God was with Adam and Eve, Moses, Ruth and Naomi, King David, the Apostle Paul, and Mary Magdalene. We're invited to tell the stories of our parents, our grandparents, our sisters and brothers, and ourselves, stories about moments where God has been the great "I AM," present in your life and the lives around you. Praise be to God that we don't serve an easily understood statue of stone, Rumpelstiltskin, or a check list of rules, but thanks be to God that we serve a God who was, who is, and who promises to always be. Amen.