

9-3-17: “A God Whose Name is Verbs” – Exodus 3:1-15

As many of you know, I went to college at a school called William and Mary, located in Eastern Virginia. William and Mary is a unique place in many ways, not the least of which being that it is literally right across the street from Colonial Williamsburg – a living-history museum of U.S. colonial life before the Revolutionary War. We used to joke in college that whatever day, month, or year it was in real life, cross that street, and it was always July of 1776.

William & Mary is more or less obsessed with the colonial and revolutionary period. Just look around at the names on the buildings: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe. And this affinity for early US history made its way into the classroom as well. One of my religious studies professors, a man named David Holmes – whose age and knowledge of these times left us wondering if he may not have overlapped with a Thomas Jefferson or James Monroe during their time at William and Mary – came out with a book during my freshman year called *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* that examined how different religious beliefs and traditions influenced the people who would found the country we now call home.

Professor Holmes’ study pointed out that while many refer to the United States as a Christian nation, the founding fathers were more profoundly shaped by a different religious worldview. While many of these people identified with and were raised in various Christian denominations, Professor Holmes argues that if you read their writings and get down to the core of their beliefs, what you find time and time again is a philosophy called Deism.

Perhaps you’ve heard this word before, Deism. The philosophy itself emerged during the Enlightenment, which makes sense because the Deist God is the quintessential ‘philosopher’s God’. This God is described as a Divine Watchmaker, a God who creates the world and then sets it free. The Deist God lives up in the faraway heavens and lets the world unfold according a perfectly logical, unchangeable divine plan. God, the Deists believed, is good, but is distant and undisturbed by human affairs.

Which is where this ‘philosopher’s God’ differs so fundamentally from the God we meet in the Bible. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the story of the exodus. God may start this second book of the Bible up in some faraway heaven, but as our Old Testament Text this morning shows us, he’s not willing to stay up there very long.

This morning’s story begins with Moses minding his own business, shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law out in the middle of nowhere. But God seeks him out, and finds him, and calls to him by name, out of a burning bush.

And as Moses takes off his sandals and approaches this bush with wonder, God explains why he is calling to Moses. “I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt,” God says, “And I have heard their cry. I know their suffering. And I have come down to deliver them, to bring them up out of the land of the Egyptians and into the Promised Land, a good land, flowing with milk and honey.”

“I have seen; I have heard; I have known; I have come down.” In these four verbs, we get a glimpse of the entire exodus story. Even, one could say, the entire story of the Christian faith. The God who calls to Moses is no ‘philosopher’s God’, no distant, dispassionate, Divine Watchmaker. No, the Voice that Moses hears from the burning bush is that of a God who is intimately present in this world, who is emotionally invested in what happens to God’s people. This is a God who is not afraid to get involved in the narrative of human history. A God who is willing to take sides, to defend the oppressed over their oppressors, and even to come down into this messy world. Into this world of Hebrews, Egyptians, Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites,

Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, acolytes, cellulite, traffic lights, water rights, and everything else – to care for his people, and to deliver them from their suffering.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt may have felt like God was distant or had abandoned them for a time, but Moses get the chance to witness firsthand how God has come down from “up there” to “down here,” and is ready to act, to get involved. The God we meet in Exodus is known and understood not according to theological terms or spiritual concepts, but through God’s own *action* in history. This is a God who is best told as a story rather than described as some metaphysical concept.

Moses is, understandably, intimidated, by this experience, this God, and by the task this God assigns him: “I will send you, Moses, to Pharaoh to deliver my people, and bring them up out of Egypt.” And as Moses stammers and stutters and tries to wrap his head around what is going on, he asks a seemingly simple question: “Who are you?”

“What is your name, God of my ancestors? If I go to Pharaoh, and to my people, with this radical message about setting the Hebrew people free, what exactly am I supposed to tell them? How am I to describe you, or any of this? Who shall I tell them sent me? What is your name?”

But our enigmatic, burning-bush God refuses to offer a simple answer, even to a simple question. “I Am Who I Am,” God says, “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” “Tell them ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ Tell them that my name is a verb – many verbs, actually – because who I am cannot be separated from what I do for my people. I am the Lord your shepherd because I lead, guide, and care for my people in the wilderness. I am the Lord your Savior because I come to rescue and deliver you, even from the bondage of slavery, sin, and death. I am the Lord your Refuge, your Rock, your Hiding Place, because I protect my people, I hold them close, gather them together as a mother hen does under the shelter of my wing. I am the one who will be called Emmanuel, ‘God-with-us’ because I dwell with my people. I will be called Father and Mother, because my love for my children is as strong and as intimate that of a parent for their tiny child. I AM who I AM. I Will Be Who I Will Be.”

I see; I hear; I know; I come down. I deliver; I bring out. I AM. Friends, this perplexing, mysterious, multi-faceted God is the God we worship. A God not of ideas or concepts, but of presence, and action. A God whose name is verbs.

And perhaps, like Moses, we, too, wonder: how on earth are we to follow this God of action, and presence, and verbs? Well, as best I understand it, following a God of verbs means being a people of verbs.

The verbs from this morning’s story might be a good place to start. We worship a God who *sees* the misery of his people. So, too, are we called to *see*, and even to actively *look around*, for where our neighbors are suffering. We worship a God who *hears* the cry of the oppressed. So, too, are we called to *hear* those cries. We worship a God who *knows* the suffering of his people. Therefore, we are called to show up for those who are suffering, and listen; listen deeply enough that we can empathize, that we can *know* their suffering as if it were our own. And then, like our active, present, God-whose-name-is-verbs, we are called to “come down”, to step away from the safe places where we can watch life and history from a distance. We are called into the mess of life and history, to come alongside our neighbors, to rejoice in their joys and weep for their sorrows.

We who worship a God whose name is verbs are called to be a people of verbs, of action. If those verbs from Exodus didn’t resonate for you, perhaps you may find a starting place in the verbs of our Epistle Reading from Romans. “*Love* one another with mutual affection; *outdo* one another in showing honor. Be ardent in spirit, *serve* the Lord. *Persevere* in prayer; *extend*

hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; live in harmony with one another. Associate with the lowly. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Whew! That’s a high calling if I ever heard one! If we weren’t feeling a bit like Moses before, I, for one, am beginning to identify more and more with his reluctant foot-dragging and protests. “Who am I to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”, Moses says. And perhaps we, too, wonder, “God, who are we to be your people? Who am I to try to hear and see and know the suffering of my neighbors? To rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? Who are we, a small congregation in one little corner of the world, to be the ones who overcome evil with good?”

And of course, God answers us the same way he answers Moses. “I will be with you,” God says. “Do not worry; do not be overwhelmed. I am the one who delivers, and brings out, and overcomes evil with good. But you are my people, and you are the ones through whom I will work, through whom I will make my Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. You don’t have to be afraid because you will not do it alone. I will be with you. And when you see all that I can and will do through you, you will come back and worship me again.”

Friends, being the disciples of this active, verb-oriented God who is present in history is hard work, no doubt about it. But it seems to me that our relationship to this God whose name is verbs is at the same time the source of our deepest comfort. Because this God who sees and hears and knows and comes down to deliver also sees *us*, hears *our* cries. This God knows *our* sufferings – even those sufferings we are afraid to name out loud. And this God has come down, in Jesus Christ, to be with us. To accompany us through our days, and weeks, and lives. To give us strength, the strength it takes to love and serve our neighbors, and the strength it takes to live through our own struggles, and trials, and sufferings.

We who are followers of Jesus Christ do not worship a philosopher’s God, a God who watches us from way “up there,” who sits back and lets all fend for ourselves. No friends, we worship a God who hears, and sees, and cares, and comes down to be present with us, right here, in the beauty and muck of this world. We worship a God who takes on flesh and becomes fully human in Jesus Christ. A God whose heart breaks so deeply at the pain and suffering of his people that this God suffers and dies alongside us.

Friends, the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is the same God who Created the heavens and the earth. The same God who comes to us, who breaks into history to call us by name. When we hear that call, how will we respond?