

The Third Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

May 30, 2010

Exodus 2:23-3:15

A long time passed, and the king of Egypt died. And the children of Israel groaned from their bondage, and they cried out. And from their bondage, their cry came up to God. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the children of Israel, and God knew.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness, and he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. And he looked, and the bush was burning with fire, yet it was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must go over to see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw him coming over to see, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "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, because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their pain, and I have come down to rescue them from the hand of Egypt and to bring them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey — the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Now the cry of the children of Israel has come to me. And I also have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He 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."

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the children 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?" God said to Moses, "I will be who I will be." And he said, "Say this to the children of Israel, '***I will be*** has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Say this to the children of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' That is my name forever, and that is how I am addressed in all ages."

Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ happened. His mother Mary had been promised in marriage to Joseph. But before they were together, she was found to be with child — by the Holy Spirit! Her husband Joseph, a righteous man who was unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. He had made up his mind to do this when [ah!] an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "don't be afraid to take Mary — your wife — into your home, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said by the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will give him the name Immanuel" (which means God with us).

When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. But he was not intimate with her until she had borne a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Children's Story

It was Celebration Day in the Great Forest. Animals had come from every direction. They had come together to laugh and to eat, to sing and to eat, to play games and to eat, and to do it hour after hour, until the sun said its farewell. Then it would be Celebration Evening. Time to sit. Time to be still. Time to listen to stories.

They loved the stories. Stories about the Great Forest. Stories about their own families. Stories that told them who they were and why they were here. Long stories and short stories, they loved them all.

Every Celebration Evening, the most important story was saved until the end: the story of Eckrich the Eagle. All the greatness of the Great Forest came from Eckrich the Eagle. The Great Forest and all the animals in it owed everything to Eckrich the Eagle. The last story of the evening told how that was so.

All the animals listened carefully to that story — so carefully that, all year long, whenever Eckrich the Eagle was mentioned, that story would come into everyone's mind. All by itself, the name "Eckrich the Eagle" told the most important story of all.

Sermon

"You shall not misuse the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH your God will not hold guiltless anyone who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7). That commandment, the third, like the others, was given within an ongoing story. The story had reached a critical, climactic moment. The LORD said, "I, YHWH your God, have brought you out of slavery in Egypt. I have chosen you and rescued you to be my people." It was all according to the promises, the old promises, promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, promises that have everything to do with God's name. So this commandment is no surprise. To abuse the name of God is to violate the story, is to scratch away at the foundation of Israel's life.

To have no other gods, to refrain from trying to capture YHWH in visual form (Commandments #1 and #2) — that's not simply a matter of particular behavior. No, it's about recognizing and taking seriously the utter uniqueness of YHWH and the utter exclusiveness of YHWH's relationship with Israel. The Third Commandment flows from that same uniqueness and exclusiveness: YHWH is Israel's one, true God, and his is the name above all names.

Stand with Moses before the burning bush, which is ablaze with the presence of God. Which God? "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). This is the God who has seen, who has heard, who has remembered. "I have seen my people's affliction," God says. "I have heard their cry. I have remembered my covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exodus 3:7; 2:24). Under that covenant, God had promised blessing to Abraham and his descendants. He had promised them the land of Canaan. And though they had been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years, now at last they were on their way.

Soon they would know something they had not known before. Abraham had not known it. Isaac had not known it. Jacob had not known it. But they, the descendants, would know it. What would they know? What would this generation know that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had not known? They would know the name of God: YHWH.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew the word, YHWH. But this generation would know the meaning of YHWH. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew YHWH as the God who made promises. This generation would know YHWH as the God who kept promises. That is at the heart of God's identity. That is who God is. In other words, that is God's name. (Read Exodus 6:2-8; it's all there.)

Actually, it was there already at the burning bush. "Tell me your name," Moses said to God. "Let me know who you are, who you really are" (Exodus 3:13). God said, No. "I will be who I will be," God said. "Call me, 'I will be'" (v. 14) — that's where YHWH comes from. "I will be with you," God said to Moses (v. 12). "And you will know who I am when you see what I do. Watch. Just watch, and you will see who I am."

So "YHWH," the name of God, had everything to do with the story of God and Israel. To say the name was to invoke the story and, at the heart of that story, God's steadfast love and faithfulness (see Exodus 34:6-7). To abuse the name, to misuse the name, to disregard the story, was to disrespect God, to dishonor the memory of God's love and faithfulness. It was to unravel the story; to cast oneself, and to threaten to cast the people as a whole, adrift; to forsake the only anchor; to plunge back into chaos. It was to reject God's

presence and to reject God's work as Creator, Savior, and Lover of his people. It was to turn away from life and to invite death.

So much is in a name, in the name. But not every name. As Shakespeare said, "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." It's not the name so much as what the name signifies.

Take the word "god" or even "God." It may signify YHWH, the God of Israel or the Father of Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity, with all of the stories that go with those meanings: creating order out of chaos, choosing Abraham to be a blessing to all peoples and to all creation, sending Jesus Christ to suffer as Israel's Messiah and to be raised as the world's Savior, pouring out the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into the dry bones of broken humanity. The word "God" might signify all that and more. It might be a name, a name not to be misused: a name not to curse with, a name not to lie through, a name not to toss around like the latest bit of slang.

But the word "god" may signify nothing of the sort. It may be the result of a philosopher's speculation. It may be a word from "days of yore" that has been completely emptied of its history. It may be a homophone: "god," sounding like "God," but not the same word at all.

Do you remember this story? It's in Exodus 5. Moses went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what YHWH says: 'Let my people go!'" (v. 1). Pharaoh said, "Fat chance!" (v. 2). Then he ordered Israel to make bricks without straw. When they heard the news, the Israelites said to Moses, "YHWH look upon you and judge you!" (v. 21). In other words, "God damn you, Moses!"

Was that a misuse of God's name? Maybe. But maybe not. They were remembering their God. And they were expressing faith: faith in God's role as judge, faith in God's ability to act. No doubt there were other issues afoot. They weren't terribly trusting of Moses, not yet. But, in all fairness, to this point Moses had given them little to base trust on. In the end, I don't think Israel here misused God's name. They used the name to reach out to God in their misery. They used the name to call upon God as their only help and defender, even when they thought maybe they had to be defended from Moses!

Our Heidelberg Catechism says — assuming that we ourselves use the name of God carefully, and I hope that's a fair assumption — **that we should do all we can to prevent and to forbid the misuse of God's name (Q100).** I'm not sure this requires us to write letters to movie and TV producers, telling them to drop the use of "God" and "Jesus Christ" in on-screen curses, or to contact Verizon to urge them to block "OMG" from text messages, or to begin policing the language in our neighbors' backyards. The problem may not be our neighbors' or Verizon's or Hollywood's. The problem may be ours.

I really do think that most people who use the words "God" and "Jesus Christ" in an offhand way do so because to them those words are just sounds without meaning. Is our task, then, to stop the use of those sounds? Or is our task, somehow, to fill those words with meaning?

The stories have been entrusted to us, stories about God and the world, about God and Israel, about God and Jesus Christ, stories that fill the name of God, the names of God, with meaning. The name of God is misused when we who have those stories don't tell those stories, stories that make sense out of our world, stories that anchor our hope, stories that set the direction of our lives.

And the name of God is misused when we Christians, who carry the name of God everywhere we go, baptized as we are "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19) — the name of God is misused when we live and speak and act in ways — What ways? Dishonesty, anger, bitterness, sexual immorality, drunkenness, and more. What the New Testament labels the "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21) — the name of God is misused when we live and speak and act in ways that cover the name of God with shame or dishonor. When our way of life empties the name of God of its glory, the blasphemy, whether on the big screen or on the tiny screen or across the fence — the blasphemy is ours.

Have you noticed that the Ten Commandments are, for the most part, not positive instructions (commands), but prohibitions? Not "Do this" and "Do that," but "Don't do this" and "Don't do that." Be that as it may, Allen Verhey of Duke Divinity School sees — rightly, I think — a changed situation in Jesus Christ. He refers to the Ten Commandments as "Ten Permissions" (Living the Heidelberg: The Heidelberg Catechism and the Moral Life), and he focuses on their positive meaning through Jesus Christ.

There is a positive to the Third Commandment, for sure, in Christ. God said to Moses, “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12). And the child of Joseph’s wife Mary would be called “Immanuel — God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). In Jesus Christ, the name of God takes on flesh and blood and breaks open the way to the renewal of all things: the world is on its way to a beautiful last chapter!

The Third Commandment invites us to tell that story, which is the world’s story and our story, the unique and exclusive story, the story with Jesus Christ at the beginning and in the middle and guaranteeing the end, the story of Jesus Christ, who has been given the “name above all names” (Philippians 2:9).

And don’t be afraid to tell that story. People seem quite ready to talk about God and religion these days. It may be “god,” but that’s okay. Join the conversation. Tell the story you know, the story you love, the story you live by. (Only make sure you have the story reasonably straight.)

And don’t be a jerk, not in the way you tell the story and especially not in the way you live. Rather, by the Spirit, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23), show what the story of Jesus and the name of Jesus really mean.