

Your God is Too Unknown

Rich Nathan
November 7-8, 2015
Your God is Too...Series
Exodus 3

In Romeo and Juliet, Juliet famously says,

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

By saying this, Juliet is saying it doesn't really matter what you call something, names are just labels. They don't communicate anything essential or significant about something or someone. Today, if you look at the way most parents name their children, you would have to say that Juliet's naming philosophy has won the day. It doesn't matter what you call someone.

Celebrities are famous for giving their kids really strange names. Sylvester Stallone named his son,

Sage Moonblood

Michael Jackson named his son

Blanket

He also goes by Prince Michael. But his given name is Blanket.

Kim Kardashian and her husband Kanye West named their daughter

North West

How about Irish singer Bob Geldorf? He named his three daughters

FiFi Trixibelle

Peaches Honey Blossom

Little Pixie

I don't know if all of Bob Geldorf's daughters were French Poodles. John Cougar Mellencamp named one of his sons

Speck Wildhorse

Chef Jamie Oliver named his two daughters:

Poppy Honey
Daisy Boo

Children ought to have the right to sue their parents for names that exceed all reasonable bounds. But no list of unusual celebrity baby names would be complete, of course, without the children of the old rocker, Frank Zappa, who named one of his sons,

Dweezil Zappa

And his daughters:

Moon Unit Zappa
Diva Muffin Zappa

Popular names go in and out of fashion, don't they? You can guess someone's age when all you know about them is their name. Picture in your mind a Mildred or an Agnes, an Ethel or a Blanche. They're probably in an episode of The Golden Girls. Or maybe they're joining your grandmother for lunch each week at the local MCL Cafeteria. The median age for a Mildred living in the United States is 79. If your name is Elmer, Fred, Herb, Earl or Cecil, you are almost certainly over 60.

If your name is Brittany, you are likely somewhere between 20 and 25 years old with the most common age being 24. Melissa? You are most likely born in the late 1970's to early 1980's. Jennifer, your name was the most common girl's name for 15 straight years from 1970-1984. Deborah? You're almost certainly a Baby Boomer born in the decade of the 1950's. Liam, Mason or Aaliyah, you are probably not in this service right now, you are in one of our preschool classes. And your older twin sisters, Hailey and Sydney, are playing soccer on a travel team for 5th graders.

Some parents choose their children's names because they actually mean something to them. Maybe their kids are named for someone they admire like Lincoln, or Kennedy, or King, or a beloved family member. We chose the name Daniel for our son because I love the old Sunday School song:

Dare to be a Daniel
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known.

I wanted my son to be courageous and confident. And when my daughter was pregnant, the Lord spoke to me about her baby one day when I was praying. I felt like the Lord said, "Her name

is Naomi because she is going to be like Naomi in the Bible – resilient, someone you can't hold down, who will always bounce back from any setback." So I mentioned that to my daughter and Sharon named her baby Naomi.

In the Bible the names given to God are not arbitrary labels or chosen because they sound nice. Instead, the Bible refers to God by lots of different names and each one reveals some aspect of his character, or his relationship with us.

I've been doing a series that I titled "Your God is Too..." I've been talking about all of the distorted, reduced views we have of God that keep us from experiencing God, loving God, worshipping God – all the reduced, distorted views we have of God that keep us from really knowing God. Today, as I continue in this series, we are going to consider some of the names by which God reveals himself to us in a message I've titled "Your God is Too Unknown." Let's pray.

So I'm talking about names and I want to talk about God's name.

God's name

If you're going to have a relationship with anyone, one of the first questions you ask is "What's your name?" If you are going to have a personal relationship with God, one of the first questions that we'll want to address is what does God call himself? What's his name?

God's name is personal

I think the first thing we learn from the Bible is that God's name can be known. It is interesting that as people drift away from the Bible, God is referred to in more impersonal and more abstract ways. So, folks will talk about believing in a Higher Power, or "Yeah, I was just talking to the Man Upstairs." Or "I believe in a Supreme Being." "The Force be with you." You see this in the writings of liberal theologians, God becomes "the Ground of all Being," "the Depth of your Life," your "Ultimate Concern;" God is "whatever you take seriously without reservations." In other words, as people move away from God speaking to them through scripture, God becomes nameless, more of an abstraction. God who is unknown.

This is what the ancient Greeks worshipped. They called God the Nameless One. In fact, in Acts 17 it tells us that in Athens there was an altar

To an unknown God

As people moved more and more away from revelation through scripture and revelation through prophecy, they used to call God's name the Unutterable Name, or just the Name – nothing personal at all. God became a total mystery to people.

Over against all of these abstractions, the God of the Bible reveals his name to us. We can know his name. So when we pray we don't pray "to whom it may concern," "Dear Occupant of Heaven" – you know those letters you get when they don't know your name, "Dear New Car Owner." That's a very warm greeting, very personal. I know they really care about me. Or the ones you get from your kids schools, "Dear Parent of Genoa Middle School Student." That's not the way it is with God. God's name is personal

God employs names in the Bible in order to reveal himself to us. There is not one name that God employs that states everything that God wants us to know about him. In fact, if you took all the names of God that we read in the Bible and you put them together, that would not reveal all there is to know about who God is. God is infinite. He can't be fully known. But he discloses so much about himself that if you study the names of God you begin to discover something of God's goodness, his holiness, his majesty, his indescribable glory, his justice. God is not ever meant to be for anyone an abstraction, a conclusion at the end of a philosophical argument. God reveals himself by personal names in order that you and I could have a personal, intimate relationship with the God who is. It is through his different names that God allows us to experience more of himself.

Let me show you how this works. In Exodus 3 God reveals his name to Moses. In other words, God reveals his essential person, his essential character, his inner being to this man named Moses. Let's look at the circumstances in which Moses encounters God.

Exodus 3:1–2 (NIV)

3 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 came to Horeb, the mountain of God.
2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

I want to ask three questions about Moses' encounter with God, three questions about Moses' experience of God. First, when do we experience God? Second, how do we experience God? And third, who is the God we experience?

I think in the encounter that Moses has with God there are lessons for us about how we might encounter and experience more of God. So let's start. First question:

When do we experience God?

God broke a 40 year silence on the day we read about here in Exodus 3. He didn't give Moses any warning. He didn't say, "Hey, Moses, get ready. I'm going to speak to you on such and such a day. I'm going to encounter you." It was a day like any other day. Moses was just doing what Moses did, tending his sheep, and then he had an encounter with God.

Has this ever happened to you? You are just doing what you normally do, and you have this wave come over you of feeling that there is something more going on here than just your normal activity? Maybe you hold an infant; maybe it is your baby; or your grandchild. You pick up the baby and look into her eyes and you have this overwhelming feeling of gratitude to someone. Who is it you want to thank?

You are walking along the beach and you are so flooded with peace and contentment, so out of proportion to your setting that you feel like it is not just the result of being at a pleasant place, but that you are actually encountering someone who is giving you peace.

You wake up in the morning having had a dream that is so profound, so different than what normally happens. You say, "I feel like God was trying to talk to me through my dreams."

Or you come to VC, maybe you've been coming for years, or it's only your first or second visit, but quite unexpectedly you find yourself deeply moved by the words of a worship song, or something in the message. There's a moment where you're so touched you feel like crying. What's going on?

When do we encounter God? Moses encountered God on an ordinary day through an ordinary bush.

Maybe the encounter is through a really hard, unexpected blow – a tragedy, a sudden devastating accident, a betrayal, a loss, or a divorce that happened to you or to someone you love.

When do we experience God? We miss this in our English translation, but you can pick it up in the original Hebrew. Moses experienced God by a burning bush. The writer of Exodus is engaged in a little word play in the original Hebrew. The Hebrew word for "bush" is:

Bush = Sneh

Now, the bush was right near a mountain called Mt. Sinai.

Mountain = Sinai

In Hebrew the bush has exactly the same consonants as the mountain.

Sneh = Sinai

I think the writer is trying to tell us something here. That any ordinary bush, any ordinary thing can be a place of encounter with God. Any ordinary bush can be Mt. Sinai for you, the place where you can meet God. You can meet God in your bedroom. Your study. Your car on the way to work can a place of encounter where you meet God. So can a church service, a walk in the woods, your workplace, your school.

You might say, “Well, that’s nice to hear that I can experience God anywhere on any ordinary day through any ordinary bush, but how do we experience God?”

How do we experience God?

Let’s look at Exodus 3.2-4:

Exodus 3:2–4 (NIV)

2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

I like the way the King James Version of the Bible puts this best. The old King James Version says this in v.3:

And Moses said, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight why the bush is not burnt.”

God is regularly speaking. He is regularly available to you and me in the ordinary places and situations of life. But we’ve got to, like Moses, turn aside; we’ve got to get off the road that we’re going on and pay attention.

The current Pope is a Jesuit. And the Jesuits frequently say that to find God, to experience God is a matter of noticing where God is already active in your life. It’s not that God is playing hide and seek with us. God is not Big Foot or the Lochness Monster; you know someone that others report that they’ve seen, but when you to go investigate there is never any evidence. “He was just here. Look at that broken twig. Look at that footprint.” God is not like that. The problem that we have is not that God never shows up. The problem is that God is showing up over and over and we race by bushes that are burning without noticing. God is at work in your everyday life. God is present. God’s not absent. The key is noticing where God is present.

The #1 excuse that pastors on our staff hear regarding why folks say they can’t serve, or can’t participate in a small group, the #1 excuse people give for why they can’t engage in some church activity is “I’m too busy.” Friends, I said this in an earlier talk, but I really believe in the 21st century that the greatest barrier to us experiencing God is not that God has stopped talking, or that God has gone AWOL. It is simply that we are too preoccupied, too busy, too overloaded. The average American spends over 7 hours a day looking at a screen – a computer screen, a TV screen, a smart phone screen, a tablet screen. Shut off the radio in the car. Stop staring at your phone. Turn off the television and pay attention. Take five minutes as you drive to work and thank God for the blessings in your life, the people who make your life work, the good things that are going

on. Take five minutes to be quiet and ask God to speak to you. Take a few minutes to review your day. What might God have been trying to say to you through a conversation, at work, or with your spouse, or with your child? What bush was burning in your day that you just needed to turn aside to see?

We need to push the pause button. We need to slow the rpms down. Listen, at the end of our lives we are not going to say, “I regret that I spent too little time scrolling through the newsfeed on my Facebook page.” “I wish I would have spent more time on YouTube watching cat videos, or cover videos, or movie videos, or that guy who whines a lot.” “I regret that I’ve come to the end of my life and missed that guy’s rant about something.” But we may say, “I’ve come to the end of my life and I missed noticing where God was at work. I often felt like I was going through life alone. I see now that God was present and I thought he was absent. I didn’t take almost any time to turn aside and pay attention, to notice what God was doing, to hear what God was saying. I could have experienced so much more of God than I did.” That will cause regrets.

When do we experience God?

All the time through ordinary bushes, through ordinary experiences that are suddenly burning with his presence. How do we experience God? We experience God when we pay attention, as we look around and notice and pray, “Lord, make me sensitive to your voice. Help me to slow down enough to notice.”

Here is the third question:

Who is the God that we experience?

In Exodus 3.13-14 we read this:

SLIDE Exodus 3:13–14 (NIV)

13 Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”

When we read in English, “Tell them I Am has sent you,” I Am is a translation of the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh. Yahweh is related to the Hebrew verb “hayah” which means “to be.” Whole volumes have been written on what God is saying as he reveals himself as Yahweh - “I am.” I think there are a couple of possibilities that make great sense to me about what the name Yahweh means, about what God is saying about his essential character and what he wants us to know about him. One possibility is that God is saying through naming himself Yahweh, “Moses, as I was with your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I will be with you. In other words, if you really want to know me, I am the one who is always there for my people.

What does I AM mean? It means I am there for you.

The name Yahweh stresses the absolutely faithfulness of God. God had promised the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would be their God, that he would be with them that he would deliver them and bless them and keep them and give them the Promised Land as a place of service and inheritance. Hundreds of years later Moses is told by God, “You and the people of Israel are going to experience my unchangeableness as I steadfastly keep my word.” Yahweh reveals to us the faithfulness of God. I am there for you. I will keep my promises to you.

Friends, is there any area of your life where you need to know that God is there for you, that God will be there for your loved ones that God will keep his promises and be faithful.

There is another meaning of “I Am”, or in Hebrew, Yahweh, that makes sense to me. What God might be saying, in essence, is “I am eternally active.” I am not just some philosophical principle. I am not simply merely someone who existed in the past and did great things 2000 years ago. I am not merely a doctrine in a theology book, or a line at the end of a Creed, or a philosophical conclusion of a brilliant argument. I am not just the one who got the world started and then stepped aside to let people run the show.

“I am eternally active. I am not simply someone who will merely do something great in the future, when my Son returns to establish his kingdom. I am active being. I am actively working in the present, right now at this moment. If you want to know who I am, I am the one who is always personally present with you. I am the one who is always personally active in your life. I am the one who is always personally involved.”

“In the hospital room, I am there. When you feel isolated as a Christian, separated from fellowship, I am there. In your family, no matter what you’re going through, I am there. I am there in your move across the country or around the globe. I am in the Army wherever you are shipped out to. I am working in your dormitory. I am in your school. I am at work in your life. I am on the move. I am drawing the lost. I am protecting the weak. I am constantly listening to your prayers. I am constantly loving your kids. I am constantly looking out for your well-being. I am constantly repairing, redeeming, restoring, refreshing and rescuing. I am presently active in the world, in your family, and in your life.”

God’s name is precious

Now, the Bible contains many names of God. Each of them reveals something of God’s personality and his inner character. I don’t know which name of God is most precious to you. But I would tell you that if you read and meditate on the various names of God in the Bible, you will be greatly encouraged.

A name that is special to me is the Hebrew name El Roi. That name that was used by a woman in the Old Testament when she was in distress and God rescued her. The woman’s name was Hagar. She was alone with her son living in an abusive situation. But her faith held strong. She

said to God, “You are El Roi, the God who sees me. Not just who is aware of me, but God, you are a God who sees me and pays attention to me when I am in distress.” Are there any Hagers listening to me today. You feel utterly alone. You may be abused. You may be despairing. Know this: God in heaven is paying attention to you. He loves you and draws near to you. He will throw you a lifeline through his people in the church.

What name of God is most precious to you? God of Justice. Don’t you love the fact that when you are ripped off, when there is no way for you to even the score, God names himself “Justice?” He is the ultimate vindicator. He is the one that will even all the scales in the end. He will make sure that justice is served because that is his name. He is the God of all grace when you need to be forgiven.

Or how about “God Our Peace.” When you are totally overwhelmed over-stressed and overwrought about some future possibility, you need God Our Peace. He’s our peace, our Shalom. He is Yahweh Yireh; the Lord will provide when you are out of resource.

God is the Wonderful Counselor when you need wisdom. He’s the Rock when you need security and safety. He is Abba Father when you need intimacy. Faithful when you need to count on him. Immanuel, which means God with us when you are alone.

But it is not just God’s name that is precious to us. We also need to look at the names by which God’s Son, Jesus Christ, reveals himself to us. Because as we learn the names of Jesus, God is drawing us into a deeper encounter with himself. It is the name of Jesus that’s so precious to his people.

I love that wonderful gospel chorus:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!
There’s just something about that name!
Master, Savior, Jesus!
Like the fragrance after the rain.

The name Jesus may be the greatest name of God, his most wonderful name. Because Jesus means Savior. And this is who God fundamentally is – he is a Savior, a Rescuer, and a Deliverer.

When the Virgin Mary was told to give the Son in her womb the name Jesus, his destiny was to save his people from their sins. Every one of us needs God to be for us, Jesus, to save us from the penalty of our sins so that we will not face God in wrathful judgment. To save us from the power of our sins. We feel stuck and trapped by life-controlling habits. Who will rescue us from the power and the grip of addictive sins? Call on the name of Jesus. He not only saves us from the penalty of sin and the power of sin, but one day Jesus, when he returns, will save us from the presence of sin. We are not going to live with our sins or the sins of the world forever. One day our sinful bodies will be transformed and sin in the world will be burned up.

What name of Jesus is most precious to you? Jesus is the Great Physician, if you are sick. The man of sorrows who weeps with you when you grieve. The Good Shepherd who guides us when we don't know what to do. One of my favorite names of Jesus is simply "Friend of sinners." When I feel ashamed of myself as I look back over the course of a day and think, "Why did I say that? Why didn't I pray with that person? Why did I respond that way? I feel so stupid." I recall this to my mind, God is not pushing me away from himself. If I'm a sinner, which I am, Jesus is a friend of sinners. God does not run from sinners. We run from sinners sometimes. We don't want to be around people who are messed up, screwed up, broken. But God in his grace and mercy draws near to sinners. Jesus is a friend of sinners.

God reveals himself through so many wonderful names. But you know, however little or much we know of God – whether we're just starting on this journey of faith, or have been at it for decades, we can always know and experience more of God. We may know God as Savior, but not as friend. We may know God as Creator, but not as Father, or as Lord, but not as Lover. There is always more for us to know and experience concerning this inexhaustible, infinite God.

I heard a preacher years ago say that you can have as much or as little of God as you want. It is not sovereignly or fatalistically determined that you or I would have a really limited shallow experience of God. To a large degree, it is absolutely the case that you and I can have as much or as little of God as we want.

Our response

Here's the question. How much of God do you want? My concern as pastor is that many of us content ourselves with a very shallow experience of God. We wade in the kiddie pool and after a while we rationalize it and say, "Well, that's all there is. That's all that God intends for me to experience." But the Bible continually encourages us to ask God for more.

Jesus tells us to ask for more in Luke 11:9-13.

Luke 11:9–13 (NIV)

9 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

11 "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Jesus is not talking to non-Christians. He is talking to people who have God as their Father, who are in a relationship of being children of God. And yet, he says, "How much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Yes, you have the Holy Spirit when you are converted as

a follower of Christ, but Jesus wants us to ask, to seek, and to knock for more of the Spirit, to go after more of God's presence in our lives.

Moses who met God at the Burning Bush and saw amazing miracles – the 10 Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea – Moses, who went up on Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, Moses prayed for more. He said, “God, I know you, but I want to know you more.” Here is what we read in Exodus 33:13:

Exodus 33:13 (NIV)

13 If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

See, it is not enough friends, for us to be accurate in our faith, to be orthodox, to have correct doctrine. We want that here at Vineyard. We want to have accurate, correct doctrine. But Moses said, “I want more than that. I want to know you. I want a direct encounter with you. And I just don't want that for myself, God, I want that for the whole church. I want the church to experience the coming of the Holy Spirit. I want the church to see signs and wonders.”

At the end of our services here at Vineyard Columbus I often invite people to begin a relationship with Jesus Christ. Often people hesitate, “I don't know very much. I need to read more. I need to study more. I need to know more before I start a relationship with Christ.” Friend, today, if you know that God loves you and he loves you so much that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ into the world to die on a cross and to pay for your sins, that he wants to be in relationship with you, if you would only open up your heart to Christ and ask Christ to save you, he will. You can start a relationship with God today with just that little bit of knowledge. And after you start a relationship with God, you will have an opportunity to get to know him better and better. But we all need to start somewhere with God. Here's the starting point. Believe that God loves you and he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to die for you on a cross and to pay for your sins. If you want to start a relationship with God, begin here.

Your God is Too Unknown

Rich Nathan

November 7-8, 2015

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Exodus 3

- I. **God's name is personal**
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