

July 9, 2023

Top Ten: Holy Name

Paul Gauche

In the Gospel of Luke, a teacher of the Law comes up to Jesus and asks him the million-dollar question. It's the question that every human being asks at some point. It's a question that all of us have asked or will ask. The teacher phrased the question this way: "Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The original meaning of the phrase "eternal life" had everything to do with the quality of life, here and now, in the present moment. The word "eternal" refers to the quality of the "fullness of time." The teacher was asking about living the "the God life" right here, right now, and how to live the life God wants everyone to live in the present. This question about eternity wasn't so much about what happens to us after we die but about how to live a full and abundant life while we're living. So, this teacher was essentially asking the million-dollar question about what it means to thrive in life: *"Jesus, how do I live my life with purpose? How do I live my life with meaning, passion, and hope? How do I live the life God created me to live?"* That's a good question. And then Jesus, in true rabbinical form, responded to the man by asking him a question. Jesus asked, "What about The Ten Words – The Ten Commandments? What do they say?" So, the man, then, in response to Jesus' question, summarizes the Ten Commandments with these two statements: *"You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourselves."* In other words, God's powerful vision for our lives, as contained in the Ten Commandments, is to love God and love others.

Last weekend we looked at the First Commandment, where God says, *"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me."* **First, God, only.** We learned that God desires to hold not just the first place in our lives, but God wants to be the only God in our lives. And all of this is rooted in God's radical love and grace for us that rescues us, pulls us out of oppression, and constantly reminds us that God is with us and for us. That's the promise of the First Commandment - that there is no other God worthy to be called our God because God chooses us; God chooses to love us. And no matter what other gods may distract or lure us away, God will continue to love us because God is our God. That's the foundational

truth of the First Commandment upon which all the other commandments are built.

In the Second Commandment, God gives us two gifts that help us stay connected to this God who loves and chooses us. To help us more fully appreciate all of this, we need to read a story from the beginning of Exodus, chapters 2 and 3. Here's the story...

Moses was a Hebrew man, an Israelite man. And he had been raised in Pharaoh's court in Egypt. It was like "dual citizenship." One day as an adult, he was out walking around and saw an Egyptian soldier beating up an enslaved Israelite – the Israelite is a relative. Now, Moses doesn't think anybody's looking, so he steps in to defend the Israelites and ends up killing the Egyptian soldier and buries him. The next day, he discovers that people know what he has done. And so, fearing for his life, Moses "gets the heck out of Dodge/Egypt" – he flees to the wilderness land of Midian, where he eventually settles down, gets married, has kids, and becomes a sheep herder.

But years later, all of that changes one day when Moses is out shepherding his sheep and sees a bush that's on fire, but the fire isn't consuming the bush. So, Moses takes a closer look at it. And as he gets closer to this burning bush that isn't burning, he's in for his second shock of the day- the first shock is to see that this bush is on fire that's not burning. The second shock is that the bush speaks to him. A voice comes out of the bush and says, *"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."* Moses knew those names. Those were the names of some of the most legendary ancestors. The voice went on to say. *"I have heard the pleas of the people of Israel, and I'm going to rescue them. And Moses, I'm choosing you to lead the people of Israel out of slavery and bondage in Egypt."* That was his third shock of the day.

So, after trying to process everything that is happening, Moses asks God a rather daring question. Moses asks, *"Who are you? What's your name? Which god are you?"* This was a legit question because, in the ancient nearest mindset, there were thousands of gods at that time: the god of the weather, the god of the crops, the god of fertility, the god of you-name-it, there was a god for that. So Moses asks, *"Which god are you, and what kind of God are you?"* And God answers Moses with this cryptic line, **"I Am Who I Am."**

Now, let's pause for a moment: this is important. In ancient Hebrew consciousness, names had meaning

and power because the name expressed the person's character. To reveal your name is to reveal your character. To know someone's name is to know that person deeply. And culturally speaking, you would only ask for the name of someone who is your equal. So, for Moses to ask for God's name was a pretty big ask. But when God revealed his name to Moses, God revealed God's essential character.

And so, the question for us then is what is God saying about his character by giving his name to us? "**I Am Who I Am.**" What does that mean? What does that say about God? What do we learn about God by knowing God's name? The name means at least three things – there is more than that, but at least three things.

First, when God says, "**I Am Who I Am,**" God is saying, *"I always have been, I always will be; there's never been a beginning or an end. And there is no other god; I am the only God there is. There may be thousands of gods in the ancient near east, but none of them are real. I am the only God. I always am, always have been, and always will be."* Secondly, when God says, "**I Am Who I Am,**" God is saying, *"I am the only God who is fully present. I am the only God who will always be with you and for you."* And third, God is saying, *"I am a God who is merciful and compassionate. I will always come to you from the position of unconditional love and grace."* So, when God gave that name to Moses, "**I Am Who I Am,**" God was saying to Moses, *"This is the kind of God that I am. I am the only God. I've always been your God, I will always be your God, I'll always be with you, and I'll always love you."* In all of this, God was revealing his character.

But there's more. God was also inviting Moses and the people of Israel, and by extension, all people of all time, into a deeper relationship because the name "**I Am Who I Am**" is a very personal name for God. Let me explain that. If I wanted to have a strictly formal relationship with someone, I might say, "You can call me Pastor Gauche. That's formal. It provides some distance. If I wanted a more personal relationship with someone, I would say, "Call me Paul." So, when God said to Moses, *"My name is **'I Am Who I Am,'**"* God was giving Moses the *"You can call me Paul"* form of his name. It was personal. It was warm. It was relational. By giving his name, God was saying, *"I am your God, and I want to be your God."*

So that story, then, sets the context for the Second Commandment. In the Second Commandment, God

says, *"Here's my name! I am giving you my name: **'I Am Who I Am.'**" And I am giving it to you so that you can know the kind of God that I am so that you can know me the way I know you. And not only that, but I'm also giving you my name so you can call on me anytime because I'm always with you."* This is like handing out God's business card with this private number, saying, *"Call me anytime, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I am your God. This is my name. This is who I am; you have access to me."*

Martin Luther, back in the 1500s, wrote a little booklet called "The Small Catechism." It was written to help parents teach their kids about faith. It focused on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. For each commandment, Luther included an explanation. Here's what he wrote about the Second Commandment. *"We are to respect and love God so that we do not curse, swear, lie, or deceive by using God's name. Instead, we are to use that very name in every time of need, to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God."* In the Second Commandment, this God who loves us and is for us and with us gives us his name so that we can call on him at any time and stay connected to him. So, in the Second Commandment, God says, *"You have access to me all the time; you can talk to me at any time."* How great is that?

As we go through the Ten Commandments, it will remain clear that God is saying a lot to us. First, God says, "I'm the only God you'll ever need." Second, God says, "Here's my name. Go ahead, call me." Next week, as we look at the Third Commandment, we'll hear God saying, "Let's talk together regularly! How about once a week? Every seven days, let's have a weekly get-together so I can remind you that "I am the God who chooses you. I am the God who speaks to you through Jesus's Living Word. I'm the God who speaks to you through the scriptures that you can read every day. I speak to you through worship, when the word is preached, and when you receive the word through communion. And I speak to you most clearly in my son Jesus. I am a God who communicates with you."

Let's make this sticky. This week: as you sit with the Second Commandment that calls us to honor God's holy name, try this: Meditate on Immanuel: "God with us, God for us." Spend some time meditating on that.