

Kids: Do you remember, last Sunday, what kind of words we looked for? Verbs. Action words. Today we get the Action Word of all action words. The Verb of verbs. Moses asks for God's name and names are nouns, things – "Sarah" is a noun, "Kieran" is a noun – but what Moses gets is not a noun, what Moses gets is a verb. God's name is "I Am." A verb. (Yes, a little more than a verb, but the emphasis is on verb: in the Hebrew, it's *only* a verb.)

My mom posted an article on Facebook from the Economist which talks about how people are "verbing" – we're turning more and more nouns into verbs. We "google," we "facebook," we "friend," we "flipchart," we "inbox," we "parent." In fact turning nouns into verbs is called "verbing." (Little kids do it all the time. The other day Asher saw someone getting in a chair and said that person was "chairing.") Verbing. Well, God is the original verber. Because of who our God is, we end up with strange-sound sentences like the one I noticed Dorette used when she prayed last Sunday morning; she said: "O Lord, you are I Am." That sounds weird if you don't know God's name is a verb.

God's name. A verb.

Let me repeat what I started pointing out last year during the Genesis series. "I Am" is what leads to God's name, "Yahweh." But in most English Bibles wherever the word "Yahweh" appears – which is over 6800 times! – they put the word "LORD" in capital letters. Myself, I think this is really unfortunate. Because now it's really not easy to tell when God's name is being used. Also, it makes it sound like God is referred to as "Lord" a whoooooole lot more than he actually is. (People often use "Lord" a lot when they pray; perhaps it should be "Yahweh"!) It's too bad this even needs explaining.

Why is the name "Yahweh" replaced with "LORD" in capital letters? Because, way back, some people thought God's name was too holy to be used. And, they never put vowels with the consonants Y-H-W-H (which is the Hebrew that's on the liturgy cover) and so to this day "Yahweh" is a very good guess as to how to pronounce but, in fact, the true pronunciation is actually lost to us. Which is one of the greatest and, I think, saddest ironies of biblical faith: that the name which God himself says in this passage is the way he is to be *remembered* from generation to generation is, in fact, actually *forgotten*. As one of my favourite authors says, "Sometimes the pious bend so far over backward that they fall flat on their faces."

Anyway, all that to say: I think we need to recover use of "Yahweh" (our best guess, and it's a pretty good one) and that's why here we're saying and hearing "Yahweh" every time we see "LORD" in capital letters in the Bible. Clear as mud? (By the way, "Jehovah" is an even more bizarre English take-off on Yahweh that takes the consonants of "Yahweh" and vowels of "Lord" in Hebrew ("Adonai") and stuffs them together into what more than one scholar has called, "the greatest non-word that exists." There's a song that sings, "There's no god like 'Jehovah,'" which is, in fact, exactly true!)

God's name. "Yahweh." "I Am." God has verbed us.

Why would God verb us?

Well, let's back up a little. In our passage today, Moses begins by saying to God, "*Suppose* I go to the Israelites," as if Moses has said to God, "I'm not saying I'm going; I'm speaking only hypothetically, for argument's sake." Moses is hedging. And we will look at this more next week. But, for crying out loud, Moses just met God in a burning bush! What else do you want? Maybe Moses doesn't really hear the promises God made to him in verse 12, that we heard last week: "I will be with you." How often do *we* hear but not *really* hear? Hear, but not believe? It may be the case that we could say that's the story of our faith lives. And so Moses' "Who am *I*?" that he asked last week now becomes "Who are *you*?"

But God is gracious. He responds. Moses shows a wee bit of openness to going back to Egypt and God responds by showing a boatload of openness. He gives his name. Only it's not a name, not a noun. It's a verb: "I Am." "I Am" doubled, in fact. A non-name like the non-burning bush.

*One* thing going on here is the message that God can't be thingified.

- Ⓟ God isn't a thing, an object – we can't name him.
- Ⓟ God isn't an idea – we can't merely discuss him.
- Ⓟ God isn't for getting things done – we can't harness his power.

God is not a thing or idea or power, but is *Presence*, to whom we can only *be* present. *All* this in contrast to Egypt in Exodus, where power – *control* – was the name of the game. Chapter 1 shows us that in spades: oppression, forced labour, Pharaoh, store cities, ruthlessness – all these words, all about control. In the Exodus story, Egypt represents death ... and God is *life*, is *so* life that nothing else can be said about him but that he *is*. He is verb.

So that's one thing with this non-name name of God's: God can't be thingified. No more gods of sticks and stones (think building projects the Egyptians were forcing the Israelites to make): God *is*. "I Am." It's a bit nonsensical, which is sort of the point. You can't apply tenses like *was* or *will be* to God any more than you can apply the names of colours literally to the sounds of a bagpiper playing "Amazing Grace." God is different, other ... *holy*, to use the word given to us last week with the burning bush.

The *other* thing going on is that "I Am Who I Am" actually amounts to something more than just that. Every commentator, down to a person, says that "I Am Who I Am" *means* something like "I Am There For You." That *that* is what God is saying to Moses and, in turn, to the Israelites, to his people. "I Am There For You."

God's name, like nearly all names in the ancient Near East was not merely an identifying label. Rather, a name is meant to say something about character and nature. And the idea here with God's name is: "*I will be there for you.*" The idea is not simply that God "is" or that God is present, but that God will be faithfully God *for them*. Israel need not be concerned about God being arbitrary or capricious – God being whimsical. God can be *counted on*.

It's hard to know exactly why Moses asked for the name. I wondered earlier whether it showed some not-believing on Moses' part, some hardness of heart. It could also be true that Moses envisions very well what's going to happen when he gets to his brothers and sisters in Egypt. Imagine Moses saying to Israel: "Hey, I was out in the desert watching sheep, and there was this bush that was burning but it didn't burn up, and then there was this voice telling me to lead you out of Egypt." Riiiiiiiiiiiiight,

Moses. Think you've been out in the hot desert sun a little too long.

Moses may well be right. It may be the case that Israel will want to know something more. Something more about this God. This God who calls the oddest people, who comes in the most surprising ways, who is a fire who doesn't burn things up. It's not too much to imagine that Israel would say, "Tell us something about this God. *Help us believe what you say.*"

And so: "He is I Am." And with this God provides not a label, but a theology: "I Am For You." The main thing God wants to do is not satisfy our curiosity about his nature, but rather to point the way out of our predicament. It is not as if God says: "I see that you are curious about me. I can fix *that*. I promise to tell you all you want to know about me." Rather, God says: "I see that you are badly fallen and hurt. I promise that I will lift and heal. And after that here is what you must do." Our main problem is not ignorance, but sin. God wants to lead confused and blinded people up and out into the light.

One person explains this difference with this story. His young daughter called to him one night, afraid of the bogeyman in her bedroom. He quickly discovered that trying to tell her there was no bogeyman was of no use. The only thing the father could do was to sit at the foot of his daughter's bed and stand guard while she slept. He said to his daughter, "If the bogeyman comes out, he'll have to get through me, and I'm tougher than the bogeyman." Later, the father wrote: "There was no sense in *denying* my daughter's fear. It had to be replaced ... replaced with trust in her father."

Rather than explain away Moses' fears and questions, God said to Moses, "For Pharaoh to get to you, he'll have to go through me. He is Pharaoh; I *Am*. I am *for you all*." The power of God is God's promise – the power to stick with who God is stuck with.

And one day, hundreds of years later, when things were least promising, when it seemed as if the God who so often seems absent had *surely* forgotten his people this time, a man came out of Judea saying strange and wonderful things about being God *With Them*. And in the end he let his blood flow over God's good earth and with that shedding of blood sealed again the ancient promise, "I Am the One Who Will Be There With You – In My Own Way." A Christian is someone who believes Jesus is the Great I Am. Jesus, like Yahweh before, said things that grammatically didn't amount to much, but theologically and spiritually amounted to everything: "Before Abraham was, I am!" he declared. And he got himself killed for saying it. But he who said "I Am" other times – I Am the Light, I Am the Way, I Am the Good Shepherd – who even once said, "I Am the Resurrection," "I am *Life*," rose from the dead to give his people life forever more.

"I will be there for you." This is not just God's *message* to us. This is *who God IS* for us.

Amen.