*My Name Forever*

Exodus 3:1-15

Those of us who have had to name children know the difficulties that might arise in finding the perfect name. Most often we choose a name that already has meaning and that goes along with our ideas of what that child may become. Of course there are other possibilities that go into naming. When our daughter was born, she was already named in my mind even before she took her first breath. The name Penny Lynn would not give way to any other name. And so it was on the day of her birth. For reasons I cannot yet name to this day it was the name that rolled out as soon as she was born. Likewise we give name to pets, characters on games, cars, whatever seems to fit at the moment

Moses needed a name for God. God had commissioned him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go. The people already had a name for God, Yahweh. But Moses needed a more personal yet more comprehensive God. The name “Yahweh” designated the history of the people following one person, Abraham and knowing the God of their history with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now Moses wanted a new name. It was as if he recognized that the Hebrews needed a fresh start. They had been enslaved for 4 centuries. Perhaps their faith had waned and they had given up hope to a certain extent. To name God would have been well beyond Moses’ ability to come up with a name that could capture the essence of God, one that would be descriptive of the God the people were to follow through the wilderness. He could not come up with one that was comprehensive enough to capture all that he knew or didn’t know about God. So God gave him a name that would capture who God was for all generations: I Am Who I Am. That was not quite a descriptive name but it did capture a profound sense of the only name that would fit God.

Today we name God in many ways: creator, Love, Forgiveness, Compassion, Judge, etc. But no one of those names captures who God is. We cannot capture God in a name. We cannot label God with any one descriptive name and give Him justice. He will for all generations be “I Am”. As much as we may like to talk about God and name his characteristics, we cannot capture them all in one sitting. So at any given time God may be called by one name and at another time he may be known by another name.

For example when we see unjust situations turned around and justice wins the day and we feel God had a hand in it we may call God “Just”. When we see God’s hand in the comfort of a person who has lost a loved one we may call God, “Compassionate”. God can be who we think God is at any time given the circumstances of our direct experience of God’s actions in this world.

But we also do a lot of blaming God for things that happen to us that cause pain and suffering. We may believe that God wanted a person to get sick so that we all could learn a lesson from that experience. We may believe that a person is born handicapped because it is God’s will that he or she be born that way. We often hear the expression, “God took our loved one for a reason.” We blame God for much of our suffering, believing that is what God wanted to happen. We seem to need answers to the whys of life.

But I would like to share a story with you. A young couple was told that their unborn child was going to die. They turned to a pastor at the church they had attended a few times…to plan a funeral. But the child lived and was born with severe physical and mental disabilities. He had many hospital stays for 21 years. But in those years it was the church who maintained and supported the family with their prayers, the love and compassion of the pastors who came and went, and the words from doctors that they needed the pastors for prayer and spiritual support they could give the family. The doctors often told the family they could feel the Holy Spirit at work when they entered a room where prayer for the family and the child were in progress. The woman who told the story found a tool that helped her share the faith that came as they lived with their son’s difficulties. A pastor had left her a paper, *What Suffering Is and Isn’t: Nine Maxims to Ponder and Apply* by Cornelius Remple. Here are the nine thoughts about God:

1. Suffering is not God’s desire for us but occurs in the process of life.
2. Suffering is not given in order to teach us something, but through it we learn.
3. Suffering is not given to us to teach others something, but through it they may learn.
4. Suffering is not given to punish us but it is sometimes the consequence of sin or poor judgment.
5. Suffering does not occur because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened.
6. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve God’s purposes, but through it God’s purposes are sometimes achieved.
7. Suffering is not always to be avoided at all costs but is sometimes chosen.
8. Suffering can either destroy us or add meaning to our life.
9. The will of God has more to do with how we respond to life than with how life deals with us.

It can be very easy to be angry at God, to believe that God had a hand in our suffering or to attribute blame to God at any given time and in any given circumstance. What is not easy is to see beyond our current set of circumstances into the many aspects of God’s character that walk with us through the human experience. What is not easy is to see beyond our limited experiences into the limitlessness of God.

The people of Israel suffered in Egypt, but it was God who heard their cries and did something about it. God raised up a voice and a leader that would lead them from Egypt into and through the wilderness. At times the people blamed Moses and in blaming Moses blamed God for leading them into a time of certain death. But it was always God who saved them with manna, water, courage to face the unknown. But their God seldom became big enough in their minds to do what they needed to survive. In spite of that they did survive and we read about the rocky relationship between the Israelites and God.

At times we limit God’s ability to shape and work with our lives to bring us what we truly need, a faith that sees us through the difficult times, a faith that lifts us to new heights, a faith that reaches out to others, a faith that gives us the courage to see justice done, a faith that offers hope in the shadow of darkness, a faith that sees a vision of Christ as the ultimate example of God’s goodness and mercy. Our names for God are often far too limited. Because God has unlimited capacity to be and do life with us, we cannot find a better name for God than “I Am Who I Am”. It encompasses all that we can be in the light of today’s experiences. Without this “I Am”, we see the world through darkened glasses. We see impossibility where there is possibility. This “I Am” God gives us hope so that we can act in this world with the hope that changes things around us.

The world is not just a world where evil seems to get the upper hand. People don’t suffer because of God, they suffer because of humanity and its often neglected need for God. We have a hard time naming God adequately. We have a hard time allowing God to be the great “I Am”. Instead we want God to take sides, to do our bidding, to “fix” things. We do not and cannot see the grander picture, but we can live with the hope that God is in it all, giving what is needed to move humanity forward into living as we were meant to live. We focus on our world problems without taking God into the equation. We have to solve the border crisis. We have to confront the evil that is ISIS. We have to do something about Russian aggression. And we can cave into the impossibility of knowing exactly what to do. But when we realize that this is God’s world and there is a bigger picture at hand, then we can live with the hope that God is already dealing with those things. This “I Am” God is working in this world because he can’t leave it alone. He loved it enough to walk in it and to suffer and die on a cross to show the way. Why would he desert it now?

I get mad at current events. I would like to shake some heads and wake people up to what they are doing to the world. I can’t do those things but what I can do is speak up on God’s behalf and offer my limited view of hope for the world. And maybe that’s what God has assigned me to do, top live and speak about a limitless God, the great “I Am” who does not know the word “impossible”. How big is our God? How limited is our naming of that God. Perhaps this is the week that we can pray with the name “I Am” for God and allow the possibilities of God’s desire to see His world through.