

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

“Hallowed Be Your Name”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on “The Lord’s Prayer”

**The Book of Exodus 3:7-15
The Gospel according to Luke 11:1-4**

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 10/11, 2010

Identity theft is a problem in the United States. “The FTC [Federal Trade Commission] estimates that as many as 9 million Americans have their identities stolen each year.”¹ The FTC goes on to explain:

The crime takes many forms. Identity thieves may rent an apartment, obtain a credit card, or establish a telephone account in your name. You may not find out about the theft until you review your credit report or a credit card statement and notice charges you didn’t make—or until you’re contacted by a debt collector.

Identity theft is serious. While some identity theft victims can resolve their problems quickly, others spend hundreds of dollars and many days repairing damage to their good name...

To deter identity theft the Federal Trade Commission warns citizens to protect their personal information. Identity theft damages your good name! You have to watch who you give your name to!

In the book of Exodus the LORD gives the hallowed Name to Moses. The LORD has heard the cries of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and because the LORD is merciful and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love, the LORD summons Moses to the servant of God’s deliverance. Moses is unsure about this project; he has all kinds of objections. Finally,

Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites... and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

This is my name forever,

¹ This and other information regarding identity theft from the Federal Trade Commission website:
<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/idtheft/consumers/about-identity-theft.html#Howdothievesstealanidentity>

and this my title for all generations.

The name that is to be hallowed for all generations the LORD gives to Moses, and Frederick Buechner quips, “God hasn’t had a peaceful moment since.”²

Identity theft is a problem for God. Identity theft is a theological problem. People steal God’s good name and use it to write checks supporting their political party or endorsing their ideology or supporting their prejudice. A televangelist borrows on God’s name to describe terrorism on September 11 and explains:

“God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.

“I really believe the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”³

Is that God’s identity? The a terrorist who murders of thousands of innocent people? A mean-spirited god passionate to punish and to get even?

We tamely imagine that God is as interested in polite language as much as we are and so we read “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Ex. 20:7, KJV/AV) and take it as a prohibition of cursing, but a more modern translation makes it clear that this is about identity theft: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses [the] name.” (Ex. 20:7 NRSV). You shall not steal the name of the Lord your God for your own profit! You shall not appropriate the name of the Lord to write checks for your cause!

If we are not tempted to sins of the magnitude possible for televangelists, our own thievery may take the form of making God sound too much like our roommate or golfing partner or someone who looks exactly like that person we meet each morning in the mirror. The phrase “God is My Copilot” may have forcefully described the experience of a fighter pilot in a single seat P-40 in combat over South Asia but when it becomes a bumper sticker on a capacious SUV it has the effect of making God sound as tame and dopey as the family golden retriever sitting on the front seat. It may be a relatively harmless bit of identity theft but the harm is done in diminishing our faith in the Holy One who set the stars in motion and who commands the seas obey their bounds.

Jewish theology has attempted to deter identity theft by prohibiting the speaking of God’s name. The name given to Moses is not pronounced. Instead, the person reading Scripture would say “Adonai” meaning, the LORD. Our bibles continue this tradition. Wherever you read in the Hebrew Scripture “the LORD” in all capital letters that stands for the unpronounceable name. The name is holy and is not even pronounced it worship. Because it was not pronounced no one is exactly sure of the pronunciation, but don’t even try it. The Mishnah, a Jewish commentary from the second century, declares, “Those who pronounce the name by its letters have no share in the world to come.”⁴ We can learn the value of shyness from Jewish sisters and brothers when it comes to speaking of God.

² Frederick Buechner, **Wishful Thinking** (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 12.

³ “Finding Fault: Falwell’s Finger-Pointing Inappropriate, Bush Says,” **The New York Times**, September 15, 2001, A16

⁴ Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, **Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews** (New Haven: Yale, 2008) 206.

I confess this a personal matter. No one is at greater risk than preachers who must speak for God, and no one more guilty.

The task of hallowing the name of the LORD is finally not our human work, however, but God's own work. That is what we pray for when we pray, "hallowed be your name." We do not hallow God's name, we pray for God to hallow God's name.

With the prayer "hallowed be your name" we ask the LORD to make holy and glorious the name of God by showing God's true character. Identity theft obscures God's character. Preachers give God a bad reputation. The church makes God appear tame and bland. The prayer "hallowed be your name" asks for the true identity of God to be revealed so that there is no mistaking who God is and what God is like. Tom Long interprets this saying, "Show the world who you are."⁵

This is a distinctively Jewish way of prayer. We need to remember that The Lord's Prayer is a Jewish prayer before it is a Christian prayer. Hallowing or making holy the name of God is God's work. The prophet Ezekiel hears the word of the LORD and the LORD is determined to set straight the matter of identity theft:

Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations... I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ez. 36:22-26)

God means to restore God's good name by delivering people from exile and by fashioning people whose life is transparent to God's holiness.

The psalms can be quite blunt about this matter of identity theft. God's good name is at stake. God's reputation as the God of Israel has been besmirched as the Babylonians have sacked Jerusalem, so the 74th psalm prays:

They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated the dwelling place of your name....
Lord, the ruins of the temple look like you don't care.
Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs,
and an impious people reviles your name....
LORD, they're trash-talking your name, are you going to let that go?
Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;
let the poor and needy praise your name.
Rise up, O God, plead your cause.
(Psalm 74:7, 18, 21-2)

LORD, hallow your name by doing your stuff!

Another psalm cries out:

Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;

⁵ Thomas G. Long, Matthew, The Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997) 70)

deliver us, and forgive our sins,
for your name's sake. (Psalm 79:9)

Notice how the psalmist understands that the glory of the name of the LORD is demonstrated by deliverance and forgiveness, with release from oppression and a new way of life. That what the Scriptures understand to be God's plan. God's true character is as a deliverer and giver of new life.

This is the way it always has been with this God with the unpronounceable name. The LORD appeared to Moses in a burning bush and explained God's holy agenda:

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt... Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

That is the character of the LORD: "I have come down to deliver... to bring them... to a good and broad land," to a new way of life.

And Moses said, "And what did you say your name was?"

God's name is deliverer: "I have come to deliver."

God's name is forgiver: "A new heart I will give you."

God's name gives new life and new hope: "to bring them... to a good and broad land."

The god who oppresses people is an imposter, an identity thief; the LORD revealed in Scriptures and worshipped in this house delivers people from oppression.

The god who demands people bind up their lives in tight little bundles is a fraud and a phony; the LORD revealed in the Scriptures and served in this place has expansive plans for the people, to bring them "to a good and broad land" and to remove our hearts of stone and give us a heart of flesh and a life appropriate to human beings.

We celebrate and worship this God in these days after Passover and Easter because God's true name is revealed in what God does. God's name and true identity are disclosed in these two great central moments: the exodus from Egypt and the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's name is hallowed by deliverance and new life.

God hallows the name of the LORD by deliverance from slavery and deliverance from sin and death.

God hallows the name of the LORD by new life in a good and broad land and in abundant life in Christ.

People prowl around in the scriptures, reading the Bible as if it were a telephone directory finding obscure laws or strange passages to peddle as God's will, but that is simply identity theft, happens about 9 million times a year, the Federal Trade Commission tells us. The authentic identity and true face of God is not obscure or strange but shines glorious and hallowed in deliverance and new life.

When you see deliverance and new life, look around: God is there. Deliverance and new life are the unmistakable fingerprints of God's true identity. If you want to know if something comes from God, check for the DNA of deliverance and new life.

We find this all through the Scriptures. Our fellowship class has been studying the epistle to the Colossians in which the Apostle describes worship:

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the

kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, *even* the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image [*the true identity*] of the invisible God. (Colossians 1:3, 13-14 KJV).

I've never thought of it this way before, but we have this cross hanging here as a deterrent to identity theft. "Hallowed be your name," O LORD in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

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