

RESTIVE IN THE EMPIRE¹
Exodus 12: 1-14
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
September 7, 2008

Who is this YHWH? sneers the god-king Pharaoh.² Most scholars believe that the voice was that of Rameses II, who reigned midway through the 13th century B.C. These are the first recorded words of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, but they are a kind of recurring refrain, not only for this Pharaoh, but for all of us to this very day!

I

Who is this YHWH? is the recurring question of all religion, and it is THE recurring question of modern history. In the Middle Ages, the Crusaders asked, *Who is this God?* and concluded that this was a Christian God who wanted all non-Christians to be put to the sword. In the 20th century Hitler asked, *Who is this God?* and concluded that this was a fair-skinned God of Aryans only. All others should be eliminated. Seven years ago this week, a group of fundamentalist Muslims hijacked three planes asking the question, *Who is this God?* concluding that this God is only for radical Muslim fundamentalists. All others should be killed or at least subservient to their radicalized, politicized, violent deviation of an

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² Exodus 5: 2.

honorable historic and peaceful faith. And now, seven years later, we ask once again, ~~Who~~ who is this God?+

The search for that answer has taken us on a journey of multiple and sometimes conflicting conclusions. It has led some to conclude that religion itself is a problem, not a solution, given the fact that the atrocities on September 11 were perpetrated in the name of religion. For others, it has brought on a deeper faith, even if that faith is more sober. For all of us, it has raised questions that have no final, conclusive, easy answers, and we struggle along while maintaining our faith.

Each year's anniversary of 9/11 is sobering. And this one comes in the midst of a presidential campaign, which invites partisan disputes over the way we have responded. Wherever you are in your own emotional memory of this week's anniversary, it is the role of the church to call us to united prayer, to gather in rather than to divide, and to express compassion rather than blame. The church is called to raise Pharaoh's old question, ~~Who~~ who is this God?+and to respond with an answer that makes sense for our day.

II

Pharaoh's question was originally asked of Moses, but who was Moses to give a good answer? He had just met this God himself! It was

back there in that remote wilderness, near the ~~the~~ Mountain of God, +as he called it, that Moses gasped at the sight of a burning bush. And out of that bush came a voice calling Moses to do something both radically political and equally dangerous: to go back to Egypt and demand that the slave system on which their high standard of living had been constructed, should be abolished!

Moses asks the Voice from the bush the same question: *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?*

And the answer that comes out of the burning bush constitutes one of the great mysteries of the Bible of the human race. God tells Moses his name, all right: ~~the~~ HWH. + From our perspective it is an unpronounceable word! Four consonants! But ancient Hebrew was written without vowels. Vowel subscripts were only added to Hebrew in the Middle Ages. By then the name of God had become so sacred that it was never uttered. Faithful Jews avoided speaking the name of God by substituting the word *Adonai*, ~~the~~ Lord, +in the text of the Bible when they came to the word YHWH. So, after such a long succession of centuries we have lost the certain knowledge of the way the name of God would have been pronounced.

We do know that YHWH is a form of the verb, *to be*.+ God's essence, in other words, is not a noun, but a verb. God is not a thing; God is being itself. All other beings come from God. But a more precise translation of the word could be, *I am who I am*. In other words, *Moses*, my name is none of your business. I am not one of your household gods that you take along for good luck. Don't try to control me by giving me a name.+

But of all the theories about the meaning of God's name, I am most fascinated by the thought of Thomas Cahill, who wrote *The Gifts of the Jews*.³ He suggests that we try to say the consonants without resort to vowels. YHWH- when you try to say those consonants without using vowels, you find yourself just breathing in, then out. In this pronunciation of YHWH, God becomes the breath of life!

Whatever you choose to name this God: the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, Allah (the standard Arabic word for God, which is used not just by Muslims, but by Arabic speakers of all Abrahamic religions, including Christianity), or what the most orthodox of the Jews call *ha-Shem*, meaning simply *the Name*,+this God is the breath of life for all people of whatever race or

³ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews, How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), pp. 109-110.

religion. And this God is not just ~~out~~ there, +but deep within us as our breath is deep within us, giving us all the breath of life.

Who is this YHWH? says Pharaoh. Answer: this God is the source of the breath of life for all people. It is with this God that you are dealing! This is not the god of partisan politics. We do not come to church for a rehearsal of the political conventions of the last two weeks. Most of us feel strongly about the presidential election, but when we come to church we are dealing with the God who spoke from a burning bush to Moses long centuries ago, the God who gave us the breath of life and called us to this place, and the God who will still be God when this election is long forgotten and even when the United States of America is a blip on the screen of history. This is the God who was, who is, and who forever will be, the God who is the judge of all our politics, and we will not shrink our worship to fit any narrow political, social, or even religious ideology!

III

The story before us today is a story of a people who were restless in the empire of ancient Egypt. The Christian story is an account of a people who are also restless. They have learned through the story of Jesus that this God, YHWH, always calls for freedom and justice, and this God is

greater than our political party, greater than our nation, greater than our culture, greater even than death.

Christian faith is about a people who are restless with the worship of any god lesser than the God seen so clearly in the life, death, resurrection, and present spirit of Jesus Christ. To follow Jesus means to be continually restive in the face of injustice.