

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
John Ryan, Associate Pastor  
"What's In a Name?"  
Exodus 3:1-15  
13th Sunday After Pentecost  
September 3, 2017**

I am going to ask you to do something we do not do very often during worship. We are going to talk to each other during worship! Hopefully you are sitting near someone. Please turn to them and tell them your full name – first, middle and last. Just for full disclosure, my full name is John Plattenburg Ryan.

Names are powerful. They tell a story about who you are or what possibly you will be. I am sure most of us, before we were born, had parents who agonized over what we were going to be named. Names define us, for good or bad.

That was not the case for me, at least from what I remember my mom telling me. When she was pregnant with me she was sure she was going to have another girl to go with Lora, my sister. This was before the days of ultrasounds and gender reveal parties. She was sure I was going to be born a girl and she had picked Julia as my name. Julia Sarah Ryan. Named after her grandmothers. I guess she was a little surprised that I turned out to be a boy. So then she was in a pickle. Most of my male relatives were John...John Wesley, John Ramsey, John William. So John I was named. And besides, she said I just looked like a John.

So how in the world did I get stuck with Plattenburg? It was a family name. It was my grandmother's maiden name and all those Johns I just talked about were John Wesley Plattenburg, John William Plattenburg and John Ramsey Plattenburg. My father, trying to get into my grandmother's good graces thought it would be a good idea to choose Plattenburg as my middle name. So, I was named John Plattenburg Ryan.

I need to remind you that I grew up in the north and everyone I knew growing up had normal or common middle names. Names like Thomas, Matthew, or Joseph. No one I knew had an unusual middle name. I will be honest, I hated the name Plattenburg growing up and refused to tell people what my full name was. But here is the rub, I lived in a small town and the Plattenburgs had been in that town for over 100 years before I came along. It was not like it was a big secret.

I was not baptized until I was confirmed in the church and remember being a 13 year old who begged the pastor of my church not to say my full name at my baptism and confirmation. I did not win that battle. When I graduated from high school, I asked that I be listed only as John P. Ryan.

Things got a little better when I went to college. Maybe it was because I was more mature or more accepting, regardless, I became more comfortable with my middle name. It is even on my college diploma, but then I do not think I had a choice. But I do not remember flaunting it around with my friends.

It was only when I ventured to Richmond, VA, the south, for graduate school did I learn to truly embrace my middle name. What I found out was that lots of people born in the south had unusual or family names. I finally fit right in! Hallelujah! Being a Plattenburg was not so bad after all.

As we are thinking about names and our Old Testament story, it's helpful to recall Moses' background and story: Moses calls himself "an alien residing in a foreign land" (2:22). But he is a man who has never really been at home anywhere. Raised by his Hebrew mother, he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (2:9-10) and given an Egyptian name, which literally means "drawn out of water." Some think his name could be "Son of no one," pointing to the fact Moses was adopted. Although he tries to intervene to help his kinfolk, the Hebrews (2:11-13), he ends up murdering an Egyptian and being rejected by his own (2:14). He flees Egypt and the mess he had created there, only to be identified as an Egyptian by the women he meets at the well in Midian (2:19). From the adopted son of royalty, Moses is now shepherding flocks (a less than prestigious job!), working for his father-in-law.

It has been immortalized in countless ways in culture. An entire generation of Americans grew up with Cecil B. DeMille's rendition of it in the epic movie, "The Ten Commandments." For a younger generation of viewers, the scene has been animated by Dreamworks' "Prince of Egypt." But neither of these movies can resist the urge to idealize the one who encounters that strange bush.

Out in the wilderness, Moses stumbles upon "the mountain of God" known as Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai--Exodus 19:11). God's appearance at Horeb was in the form of flames in a bush. God often appeared in Scripture in the midst of flames. In Genesis 15:17 God appeared to Abraham as a "fiery flame." Beginning in Exodus 13, God would lead the Israelites as a "pillar of fire," "The Lord's glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain." In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples, the Spirit appeared as flames of fire. And in Hebrews 12 tells Christians to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

God instructs Moses to remove the sandals from his feet. The gesture is an ancient practice when entering a holy place of divine presence. It is a gesture that honors the holiness of this ground, this mountain and this God. Removing shoes as a show of reverence is a practice still in use in Islam and other religions. Adam Hamilton writes in his recent study on Moses "Many Christians have lost this sense of reverence, respect, and awe when gathering for worship. In our focus on friendship and intimacy with God, and our emphasis on the grace and acceptance of God, we sometimes forget that "our God is a consuming fire" and that God demanded of Moses the ancient Near Eastern sign of respect, the removal of one's sandals.

However, removing his sandals has a second significance in light of Moses' earlier self-declaration: "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land." Taking off one's sandals is a gesture in many traditional cultures that is associated with entering not only a worship space but also a home. Thus, here at the foot of the mountain of God, Moses the "alien," has at last found a true "home." Moses finds his true home not with humans but with God, the God of his ancestors, "the God of Abraham...of Isaac...of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6).

God calls Moses to go back to Pharaoh, lead the Israelites out of their miserable slavery in Egypt and travel to the promised land of Canaan (3:7-10). As in some other call stories in the Bible (Jeremiah 1:1-10), Moses resists the call and raises a number of objections to which God responds. Moses first pleads his own lack of skills and qualifications. Who am I? he asks. (3:11). God responds. None of that matters; "I will be with you" (3:12). The people will ask Moses, what is this God's name? (3:13). God responds with a long explication of the divine name, "I AM WHO I AM" (3:14). Perhaps a better translation of the name from the Hebrew is "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE."

This divine name is built on the Hebrew verb "to be" and is related to the divine name used frequently throughout the Old Testament, "Yahweh," or Y H W H (the transliterated Hebrew consonants without the vowels). In the Jewish tradition, this special name of God is considered so holy that it is not to be

pronounced in prayer or worship (hence, the absence of vowels). The NRSV translation represents this special divine name with the phrase "the LORD." This is the convention used by the ancient Greek and the Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew.

As with the burning bush, this special divine name serves both to reveal and to hide. The mysterious name invites us, as readers, to read on and discern how a series of God's self-declarations of God's own name ("I am the LORD/YHWH...") at key points in the Exodus story explicate and fill out the character and identity of Israel's God.

Moses was full of excuses on why he, Moses, was not fit to do God's bidding. I think we are often like Moses too. Let someone else make a stand, I don't have the time, energy, patience or courage to do what I know needs to be done.

It is interesting to note Moses' first objection, which questions his own identity: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses is reluctant to take on the role that God asks of him, but really, who better than Moses? Amy Willis, an Old Testament professor at Lynchburg College says "His dual identity seems to make him the perfect person to confront Pharaoh for the sake of the Hebrews. What is more, despite his reluctance and his own earlier misguided interventions, Moses is driven by a deep sense of justice -- a desire to intervene for the victimized and the mistreated, wherever he sees injustice taking place (2:11, 13, 17)."

But even for God the task of getting Moses back on track is no simple matter. The typical commissioning scene involves the prophet's objection to God's commission. The objection highlights the prophet's dependence upon God in undertaking sacred work and reveals an appropriate sense of humility. But Moses is not typical in any sense. Instead of one objection, Moses raises four (3:11,13; 4:1,10) before saying flat out, "O my Lord, please send someone else" (4:13)!

Amy Willis goes onto say: "*In this (and every!) prophetic commissioning scene, God's work is once again aligned and intertwined with human agency. Just as Moses saw the Egyptian beating a Hebrew (2:11), and Pharaoh's daughter saw the child and heard him crying (2:6), so also has God seen the misery of the people and heard their cries (3:7) and has been moved to action. Indeed, such seeing, knowing, and acting for others is part of the very identity of God. And much as Moses' identity emerges from his own past, so God's actions in the present emerge from God's past commitments to the ancestors (3:15). The God of the Exodus is one who remains faithful to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But unlike human commitments that can waiver and fade, God's identity will be constant. God will be known in God's future faithfulness to Moses and the people -- "I will be with you," God promises.*"

So then, what do we do with Moses' call story and indeed ours too? Offer excuses and hopefully God will let us off the hook? Run the other way like Jonah? Pray that someone else will answer our call? I am not sure it really works that way.

In Jim Newsome's Interpretation Bible Study on Exodus he says "*An interesting feature of this passage is God's patient persistence. The burning bush is impressive, to be sure, but it does not reveal the nature of God as dramatically as the manner in which God responds to Moses' protests. In each case, God takes what Moses has to say with utmost seriousness. Does Moses feel himself unworthy? God promises to accompany him. Does Moses need to know the name of God? Here it is: 'I am.'* Does Moses stammer? God will be his mouth. Is Moses still afraid to face Pharaoh alone? God will send Aaron along to accompany him."

So, I wonder what God is calling you to do, what has been placed on your heart? In the aftermath of the recent flooding's in the United States, are you being called to travel there with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance? What task are you being compelled to undertake that seems much too large to accomplish? Perhaps you are being called to make a stand on equality issues here in the United States.

Regardless of the call you have been given, rest assured God promises to work with you in the accomplishment of those tasks. God, the great I Am, understands the fear and self-doubt that remain in our hearts. God will be with us, we just have to be brave enough to answer, like Isaiah, Here I am Lord, send me.