

Who's Calling?

One of my pet peeves (It's silly. I know.) is to call someone at his/her office, and the secretary asks, "May I ask who's calling?" I always want to ask—I never do; but I always want to ask—does it make any difference?

Now, I understand the necessity of screening calls, sometimes. Jo Lynn for years has said that I should have the church secretary hold my calls if I'm working on something that requires concentration, or if there's a deadline. I just believe that one of the most important qualities of a minister is availability; so you'll rarely find my door closed, or my calls being held. Of course, when I do get a call, I always appreciate when Jessica says, "Fred Jones is on line one."

It's really a moot point in most cases, because when I call someone I almost always identify myself first. But, does it really make any difference who calls?

A friend calling, just to say, "Hello."

The police calling at 2:00 a.m.: "We have your son; come pick him up."

A telemarketer: "You're pre-approved for another credit card."

Your son's principal: "Can you come to my office? We need to talk."

I still remember a call several years ago: Kyle was squealing in delight over the Dallas Cowboys' jacket Jo Lynn and I sent him for his birthday.

It does make a difference who calls, doesn't it? God called Moses, and Moses asked, "Who's calling?"

EXODUS 3:1-15 (NRSV) *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. ⁷Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.' ¹³But 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?' ¹⁴God 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.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

"Take off your shoes, Moses. You're standing on Holy Ground". Right away, Moses knows it's not a telemarketer!

It is important to know who's calling. In many ancient cultures, including the ancient Middle East, to know a person's name was to have power over that person. Now Moses knows God's name, and that name serves precisely to make God vulnerable to a relationship with human beings. But since it was God who called Moses by name, there can be no projection by human beings of what they want their God to be. God already has a name; and God will be what God will be.

And in the act of calling Moses by name, God identifies with a community which has names: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel... Those names tie God to a *particular* people, and to their history. God will call whom God will call.

Further, by calling anyone by name, God admits a desire for intimacy, and becomes accessible. When one has a name, one can be addressed. God will love whom God will love.

God's name is full of mystery, and it's so sacred that even today Jews will not say it aloud. Several years ago I asked the rabbi of a Jewish temple in Tulsa, "What does it mean?" He said, "Nobody really knows what it means". (YHWH) Literally, it is a verb—the name of God is a verb: "I AM." But when Moses said, "When I go to Pharaoh, 'Whom shall I say is calling?'" The voice from the burning bush replied: "I AM I AM."

It may mean, "I am who I am." Or, maybe, "I Am because I Am." Or, it could mean "I will be who I will be;" or, "I will cause to be what I will cause to be;" or "I will be who I am/I am who I will be."

Some suggest God was evading Moses' question. But I agree with Terence Fretheim, who takes it, not as an evasion, but as God's promise to be faithfully God. Fretheim writes, "*Israel need not be concerned about divine arbitrariness. God can be counted on to be who God is. God's name means God will be faithful.*"

Most of all, this self-naming of God announces a new development in Israel's understanding of God. No longer is God the "God of our fathers." God accepts human resistance and weakness—here and now—and works through it to form history. God calls Moses by name, because God desires partnership with people.

But before one can hear and know the name of God, one must stand on Holy Ground, and in the presence of unspeakable mystery make a thorough and honest inventory of one's own self.

Moses asked, "But who am I, that I should go?" "I have a reputation with those people. My picture is on several Post Office walls—back in Egypt. They won't to listen to me!"

"Who am *I*, that *I* should go?" "I've got this speech impediment. They'll be rolling on the floor laughing at me!"

But the God whose name speaks faithfulness replies, "I will be with you." God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called. Haven't you ever given your child money to buy you a Father's Day present or a Mother's Day gift? It's true: none of us has within ourselves the resources to accomplish what God calls us to do. But whom God calls, God qualifies. "I will be with you!"

So, it *is* important who's calling; but it's not always easy to tell when it's God who's calling. We need a heavenly secretary to buzz on the intercom and say, "God is on line one."

Actually, it's not so difficult to hear and know the call of the God. It's built-in. Listen as God introduces himself to Moses: "*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*"

"I have seen the misery...."

"I have heard the cries...."

"I know the sufferings...."

"I have come down ... to bring them up...."

The call is embodied in the very nature and identity of the God whose name is a verb. It is repeated and reaffirmed in Isaiah and in Jesus: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (LUKE 4:18-19 NRSV)

It is echoed in the prophet, Amos : "*Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" (AMOS 5:23-24 NRSV)

And in the prophet, Micah: "... *what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (MICAH 6:8 NRSV)

God's name is a verb; and the call of God to all God's people always is a call to action. If the name of the God we worship is I Am, it seems to follow that it is through what We Are that we are fitted to worship and serve God.

We can answer as Moses did: "Who am I, that I should go?"

Or we can answer as Isaiah did: "Here am I, send me!"