

Be Still and Know that I Am
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
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Scripture: Psalm 46, John 10:1-10, NRSV

Hymn: Be Still and Know (Arr. Jack Schrader)

John 10:1-10 (NRSV):

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

A few weeks ago, the lectionary passages led me to preach on Exodus 3, the story of Moses and the burning bush. Remember this is the story of Moses the shepherd, out tending his flocks, who encounters God in a bush that is on fire but not burning up. And this is the story when God reveals that the true name for God is “I am who I am,” which can also mean, “I will be who I will be” in the original Hebrew. I was reminded of this name for God because our line of the contemplative prayer we have been making our way through these past few weeks is, “Be Still and Know that I Am.”

If you’ve been following our worship series these weeks, you know that this line comes from Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God,” and as part of a contemplative or meditative prayer, we take away one part of the verse to give it a different emphasis each week, following the lines of the prayer. I will end my sermon

with this prayer practice today. Our line, “Be still and know that I AM,” brings to mind the mysterious richness of Moses’ encounter with God in unquenchable fire and flame.

If we look again at that story, one interesting detail stands out. You see, God reveals Godself in fire, but does not immediately reveal God’s name of “I am who I am.” No, it’s not till Moses asks that he comes to know God’s name. It might seem kind of audacious, kind of a gutsy move, to us. But this is the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and talking to God – even talking back to God! – is part of the Hebrew worldview. Think of the book of Job, or all those psalms that demand God act, now, saying, “how long, O Lord?,” or Jacob wrestling with the angel until he receives a blessing (Gen. 32). And here we have Moses experiencing a revelation of God, and his response is: “give me more specific proof that it’s you, God. What is your name?” “I am who I am,” God replies. It’s kind of an answer, but kind of not – a mysterious name that both reveals and conceals who God is. I want to talk today about three aspects of this Divine name.

1. “I AM” as the God of Life

“I am who I am” is made up of four Hebrew consonants, YHWH, which we pronounce

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“Yahweh.”¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about a beautiful Jewish tradition of interpreting the syllables of this name for God, “Yahweh,” as “literally the sound of breath itself”:

“Inhale, *yah*. Exhale, *weh*. Inhale, *yah*. Exhale, *weh*.”² Here we are reminded that

God is the source of our life-breath, the creator Yahweh, who breathes the breath of

¹ The Hebrew word, YHWH, above is from Wikimedia Commons.

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 111.

life into us. This is the God of Life, the God of the very breath in our lungs. And, on top of that, as Patrick has spoken about in his exploration of Psalm 46 these past weeks, this is the God of peace – the God who wants to preserve life, to have life flourish. This is the God who “makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, [who] breaks the bow and shatters the spear,” (Ps. 46:9). So as we meditate on the line, “Be still and know that I AM,” we are reminded that this is the God of Life.

2. “I AM” as the Image of God

“I am who I am,” Yahweh, is not only a mystery in terms of its meaning, but also, it seems, in its very grammar! In an article called, “Our Father, Who Art Our Mother” (a lovely take on the first line of the Lord’s Prayer) scholar Mark Sameth points out that the name Yahweh “is composed of the Hebrew pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she,’” something taught in the Jewish mystical tradition as far back as 1540. In Deuteronomy, Moses even flips back and forth between addressing God as he or she in the Hebrew. This points to “a dual-gendered God,” a God who encompasses both male and female, and yet overflows them, blurring that binary. There are many examples in the Bible of God as our Father and our Mother, but the gender-fluid or gender-queer grammar of this most important name for God has escaped us in its genderless English translation.³

³ Mark Sameth, “Our Father, Who Art Our Mother: The (Open) Secret Queer History of God,” *Religion Dispatches*, Aug. 13, 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/our-father-who-art-our-mother-the-open-secret-queer-history-of-god/?fbclid=IwAR1gnpktG1qJhU4tHV07clWY1GiiJ461ZqbDgqp0ODuGRcxfYbBqMOXlleM>. See also: David Wheeler-Reed, “What the Early Church Thought about God’s Gender,” *The Conversation*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-early-church-thought-about-gods-gender-100077>

So, why does it matter that this name for God encompasses more than one gender? Well, because it reaffirms that all of us are created in the divine image, no one more than another. As people created in God's image, in the image of "I am who I am," we can know that we ourselves and others are worthy of love and respect, of dignity and care, and have great capacity for love and compassion, in the image of the God who created us. As we pray, "Be still and know that I AM," we therefore remember that we are in the image of Yahweh, "I am who I am" – all of us, whatever our genders and individual gifts.

3. "I AM" and the Sayings of Jesus

We come now to another layer of meaning related to this name for God: the "I am" sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. There are seven times when Jesus declares, "I am _____," with the metaphors ranging from "the light of the world" (John 8:12) to "the true vine" (John 15:1), and culminating with, "Before Abraham was, I am" – a clear reference to Jesus' Divine nature (John 8:58), Jesus' connection to "I am who I am." In our passage for today, from John 10, Jesus has another "I am" saying: "I am the gate for the sheep." Now we might be more familiar with the "I am the good shepherd" saying that comes immediately after our passage for today (John 10:11), but here Jesus says he is the actual gate. He is the gateway through which the pastures of salvation lie for those sheep, as he explains in v. 9. And salvation means that Jesus "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (v. 10). I know this verse has been used in narrow and exclusionary ways in the

spirit of Christian supersessionism or supremacy, but if we put that baggage aside, I see a generosity in this “I am” saying of Jesus’. Jesus here provides a way – a gate – that leads to green pastures (and perhaps still waters, too – Psalm 23), that leads to what we need to have life, and have it in abundance! Jesus provides a way for the flock of sheep to go, so that they may thrive. Like the shepherd Moses so long before at the burning bush, Jesus identifies as “I am” – as the God of Life, who desires justice and peace for all of us, who are in the image of Yahweh, our Creator who breathed the breath of life into us. So our prayer, “Be still and know that I AM,” also reminds us of Jesus’ identification with “I am who I am,” the God who is with us, Emmanuel.

Before we say the prayer together, I want to say a few words about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the U.S. Supreme Court Justice who died last week. There was a post by Molly Conway circulating on social media about the proper way to express condolences in the Jewish faith tradition, which was Bader Ginsburg’s tradition. One is supposed to say, “May her memory be for a blessing.” Conway explains what this means: “When we say ‘may her memory be for a blessing,’ the blessing we speak of is not ‘may we remember her fondly’ or ‘may her memory be a blessing to us.’ The blessing implied is this: *May you be like Ruth*. Jewish thought teaches us that when a person dies, it is up to those who bear her memory to keep her goodness alive. We do this by remembering her, we do this by speaking her name, we do this by carrying on her legacy. We do this by continuing to pursue justice, righteousness, sustainability.” Conway ends with, “May

her memory be for a blessing. May her memory be for revolution. May we become a credit to her name.”⁴

If it's not too much of a leap, I think that this is also the way God's personal name, "I am who I am," can function in our lives. As we still ourselves to focus on God, the "I am," may we remember the God of Life and Breath, may we remember the God whose image we bear, may we remember Christ's way of abundant life. And may these memories be "for a blessing" where blessing is needed, and "for revolution" where change is needed. And "may we become a credit" to the name of God, our Father who art our Mother.

And now, please join me in the prayer practice:

- 1) "Find a quiet place, gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Prepare to pray the Psalm [46:10] in 5 consecutively diminishing sentences."
- 2) "Either aloud or quietly to yourself, say the words, 'Be still and know that I am God.'"
- 3) "After a couple deep breaths, pray, 'Be still and know that I am.'"
- 4) "After a couple deep breaths, pray 'Be still and know.'"
- 5) "After a couple deep breaths, pray, 'Be still.'"
- 6) "After a couple deep breaths, pray, 'Be.'"
- 7) "When ready, pray, 'Amen.'"⁵

⁴ Molly Conway, "May Ruth Bader Ginsburg's memory be 'for a blessing.' What, exactly, does that mean?" *The Forward*, Sept. 20, 2020, https://forward.com/scribe/454812/may-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-memory-be-for-a-blessing-what-exactly-does-that/?fbclid=IwAR3BFxDQ5v_ie29E20Px5K-00KiLTBh7qdSeh2Tpm88aoEcqJIY5-VJACf0

⁵ The instructions for this prayer come from: <https://gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still/> There is also a video by *The Work of the People* that can be used for the prayer: <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/be-still>