

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

WHAT'S IN A NAME: GOD AND MOSES—PART I
Exodus 3:1-10

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According to one of the biblical creation reflections, one of the most basic human desires is to know the difference between good and evil, that is, to possess the ability to make wise decisions about what is in one's own best interest. This biblical story also suggests that such knowledge belongs only to God as the creator and, as such, is denied to humans as creations of the creator. Yet the desire to know what God knows, to acquire this attractive knowledge, to become wise is so powerful that humans will violate a command of God not to eat the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As we began a new academic year, I suspect this same desire preoccupies many of us this morning. It matters little whether we are students, faculty, staff, or administrators, whether we are beginning our time here or continuing our studies and service; we are concerned with knowing good and evil. We may not phrase it this way, but this is one of our basic desires as well. The more pious among us might express it as wanting to discover God's will

for our lives while the more secular might understand it as learning what to do so that we can do the right thing. Whatever we call it, one way or another, we all want to know what the right thing is so that we can do it, do it in our workaday or go-to-class lives, in our personal lives, in our relationships with others, and maybe even in our larger world.

What is the right major for me? What is the right job for me? Even is this the right school for me? Am I considering the right graduate schools? Am I doing the right research project? Is this the best way to teach this material? Is this the right general education program? And on and on we go in our endless pursuit of wanting to know and do the right thing.

In the biblical story of the Exodus, Moses asks his own version of these questions, questions relevant to his own life, from a theological perspective. It's not enough that God has appeared to him in a burning bush and commissioned him to free the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Moses wants to know more. He has one question and then another question, followed by a concern and finally a desperate plea.

Question number one: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of the land of

Egypt?" He is asking: "Is this the right thing for me to do? After all, I am a simple shepherd, not a hostage release negotiator. I have been educated on the shepherding hills of Midian, not in the halls of Harvard's diplomacy school. Is this really the right career move for me? After all I tried, once upon a time, to do something about the injustices experienced by my people in Egypt. Was I successful? No! I had a contract taken out on my life and had to seek refuge in these very shepherding hills of Midian." Thinking this way Moses asks his question: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"

God does not explain to Moses why this is the right thing for him to do, nor does God reveal the divine rationale for selecting Moses. God merely appears to him in a burning bush and instructs him to return to Egypt and deliver the Hebrews from slavery.

The particulars of God's plan and the logic supporting such a plan remain hidden from Moses. God does, however, respond to Moses' doubts about his ability to secure the release of the Hebrew slaves with the words: "I will be with you."

Not content with what has been revealed to him, that God is with him, Moses wants to know more. So Moses comes back at God with a second question: "If the Israelites ask

me, 'What is God's name?' What shall I say to them?"

Wanting to know God's name is more significant than it might appear. In ancient cultures, names were more than just the way keeping track of people. Names revealed character and intentionality. Names established relationships. If you knew a person's name you learned something about them. You learned what kind of person they were. You knew their goals and purposes in life. You learned their intentions, good or bad, as they interacted with you.

So when Moses asks for God's name, he is not merely requesting a form of identification. He is asking for a close, personal relationship with God. He wants to know what God intends to do. He wants to know the particulars of God's plan for him. He wants to know more specifically what he should do so that he can do the right thing. In other words he wants to know good and evil. He wants to know that which God has hidden from him. Therefore, he asks God for the divine name.

God responds: "I am who I am." In his retelling of this story, comedian David Steinberg imagines Moses' reply as: "Thanks for clearing that up." Moses does indeed learn the divine name, but it does not reveal to him any further information about the divine intentions, and purposes, or

rationales. Known only to God, these are hidden from humans.

The divine name, YHWH, can also be translated "I will be who I will be." The future orientation of this second translation suggests that if Moses wants additional information, he will need to take up his commission and return to Egypt to free the slaves. He will need to live his life out into the future. Only in the process of living his life out into the future will more be revealed to him.

God does give Moses a little more help. God reminds him that the deity who encounters him is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For any Hebrew this identification would be meaningful. For God promised these ancestors of Moses that God would give them a land of their own, that they would become a great nation, and that God would bless them, that is, that God would provide for their material, as well as spiritual, wellbeing. They were additionally promised that God would work through them to bring these divine blessings to the rest of the families in the world.

Moses is not starting from square one with a brand-new God. The Hebrew people have a long, centuries old relationship with the God who engages Moses at the burning

bush. While much may be hidden, for such as the nature of God, this God has already revealed the divine intention and purpose to bring wellbeing to the families of the world. Moses is but the next step in this overarching divine plan.

Still not satisfied, Moses voices a new concern:

"Suppose the people do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" This time God gives him some signs to convince the people, for example, a shepherds staff which turns into a serpent and vice versa.

When the questions have been answered and the concern addressed, all that remains is a desperate plea: "Oh my Lord, please send to someone else." Not surprisingly the storyteller tells us that God becomes angry at Moses' repeated requests for more information, at his desire to know the particulars of his mission, and at his need for assurance that he is always going to do the right thing at the right time. But just as quickly as God's anger flares, it dissipates. God tells Moses that his brother Aaron will accompany him and be there to support him. God then tells him in effect to: "hit the road." There will be no more questions and no further debate. This discussion between God and Moses has come to a conclusion.

In spite of his ardent desire for more information about the particulars of his task, Moses is sent off, and

not for the last time, to figure out for himself as best he can the nature good and evil, that is, to discover for himself what he should do in order to do the right thing. Moses is sent on his way, to live his life into the future, and to accept the human limitation that he may never be sure that his actions are right rather than wrong. He must, in the words of poet Theodore Roethke, "learn by going where [he] has to go." Such is life in a divinely ordered world where the order is often hidden from us.

Moses must then engage the particulars of his commission without knowing if his actions are right or wrong, without knowing whether or not he is doing the right thing. And so must we engage the particulars of our careers at Augustana, whether we are students, faculty, support staff, or administrators. However instead worrying about what God has hidden from us, it would be more helpful for us to focus on what God has revealed to us. God may not have revealed to Moses the specifics of his mission just as God may not reveal to us the specifics of our lives; but God does reveal to him, and to us, that God is with us, that God is concerned for our wellbeing, and even that we have people around us who will support and help us. God reveals to Moses, and to us, that God is with us, maybe not in ways we would like, but nonetheless with us.

Across the centuries, this promise binds God to us until at last a child is born who is named Emmanuel, God with us. We may want to know more, but do we really need to know any thing more than God is with us?

Today Dr. Richard Bowman preaches the first sermon in the Chair of Moral Values Fall Sermon Series "Knowing God, Knowing Good and Evil." Today's sermon, "What's in a Name: Moses and God--Part I," will be followed next Monday with "What's in a Face: Moses and God--Part II." Dr. Bowman will lead a community discussion on both sermons in the Three in One room in the Commons Building on Tuesday, September 16. All faculty, staff, students, and administrators are welcome. Treats will be served.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

AG Silver – Wednesday, September 10th at 9:00 in the Back Alley - "Clean Water for Africa Tour" - This Fall, award winning band AG Silver will be partnering with Blood:Water Mission to raise money to dig wells and provide much needed clean water for designated African communities. Blood:Water Mission's current campaign is dedicated to digging 1000 wells in 1000 African communities to provide clean water to areas that are in desperate need of it. Through the initiatives that Blood:Water Mission has in place, **\$1 = clean water for 1 African for 1 year.**

WORSHIP

Midweek Worship - MWF - 10 AM in the chapel. Monday: Word and Prayer; Wednesday: Holy Communion; Friday: Senior Speakers.

Roman Catholic mass is offered monthly. This month the date is **September 9, 10 AM.**, in the chapel.

Student Congregation -11 AM each Sunday that school is in session. All are welcome!

CAMPUS MINISTRY STAFF!

Interview times will be posted on the chapel office door, interviews to be held on **Monday, Sept. 8th**. If you are interested in serving as a chapel musician, check with Carol in the chapel office.

INVOLVEMENT AND SERVICE

Forms available today and at the activity fair on September 8. Sign up to receive e-mails about upcoming events!

OUTREACH

Groups of students lead worship and youth retreats across the region. A great way to get acquainted with a smaller group of students of all ages with a modest time commitment! - **Ice Cream Social in the Frosh dorms on Wed., Sept. 10th,**

SERVICE TRAVEL

7 pm

Service includes local involvement and advocacy and travel to Pine Ridge [fall break], New York City [J-term break] and storm stricken parts of the country through Lutheran Disaster Response [Spring break]. Details at the **travel fair on September 23**; info at the activity fair!

This week in chapel:

Tuesday (9)	Roman Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. Joe Vogel
Wednesday (10)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Ann Pederson, Reli. - Outreach Ice Cream Social - Frosh Dorms, 7 pm - AG Silver - Back Alley, 9 pm
Friday (12)	Worship, 10 am - Al Helbig, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (14)	Worship, 11 am - Beth Singleton, '11 preacher