The God of our ancestors

A sermon on Exodus 3:13–15

Isaac S. Villegas

In Exodus, when Moses talks with the burning bush, he asks the fire about its identity, about how to tell others who this is, what kind of deity could this be.[1] "The God of your ancestors"—that is who this is, the voice says to Moses (Exod. 3:13).

In the church—through our worship, our songs, our theologies—we've inherited the God of our ancestors, and those ancestors have infused their gendered images of God into our faith. Their representations of the divine produce the pictures of God in our heads when we worship and pray. And the voices of our Christian tradition, in the long view of history, have been sexist, even if things were different in the beginning, and even if there have been moments here and there, bright spots—episodes of egalitarianism.

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We see shifts happening in the New Testament itself, where some parts paint scenes of women and men in shared leadership; but as the Christian movement develops, we see restrictions put on the role of women in the church. That's what we read in the "deutero-pauline epistles"—First and Second Timothy and Titus—which disciples of Paul wrote later under his name. Those writers represent a Christianity that wouldn't allow women to preach during worship or lead churches, which differs from the church's practices in the book of Acts.

The same shift seems to have happened in our own particular Christian tradition, the Anabaptist movement, which started out in the sixteenth century with women in leadership but soon restricted those roles

1 This sermon was preached at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship on January 12, 2020, and previously appeared at https://breakingground.us/god-of-our-ancestors/.

to only men. Here in North America, the first Anabaptist community to ordain a woman was First Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, in 1911. Not only was Ann Allebach the first woman ordained in our tradition; she was a powerful and respected voice in the women's suffrage movement in Philadelphia and New York City. A heart attack in 1918 cut short her ministry and activism. She died at forty-three years old.

For most of history, the church has been far too comfortable with sustaining the power of men over women. A sermon is as good an opportunity as any for us to start to untangle ourselves from the sexism that permeates our lives, that even flows through the history of our faith, passed on to us by our ancestors, the men who have taken their cues from our Scriptures, which they have used to justify their power, their dominance.

Asking God for a name

God says to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6). Disappeared from the list are the women, Sarah and Hagar, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. The ancestors are the fathers; they are the ones entrusted to pass along the faith through the generations, from one man to another, to instruct the people in the faith, as has been the case with those who have developed our default theologies, the men who have formed our imaginations.

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The theologians whose authority has been recognized by the church, over the years, have been men. They—we, I should say—have been doing most of the thinking and writing about God. So it is no coincidence that God has been described in masculine terms and images, with male pronouns—our imaginations infected with sexist notions about God. Patriarchal language for God influences the way we think. We construct our images of God with the words we use—whether intentionally or not.

The worry about our language for God isn't only a modern concern. Moses has the same concern when he asks God for a name, for God's name: "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 tell them?'" (Exod. 3:13).

The request seems straightforward enough: Moses wants to get a sense for the identity of this voice speaking from a mysterious bush. "What's your name?" Moses says to the fire. We cannot really blame Moses for wanting a little more information, as he stands barefoot before this bewildering scene.

The voice answers him, giving Moses all that he needs to know. "I am the God of your ancestors," the flames say, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:15). This voice claims to be the One who has been with Moses's people through the generations. *I am the God*, the fire says, *the God who has been with your people, who has walked with you, who has cared for your lives*. God wants to be known as the God of Israel, the One who loves and cares for a people, the One who will save these same people from slavery in Egypt.

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This is an important point for thinking through how we name God. This passage weaves together the identity of God and the identity of the people, the one has everything to do with the other. God will not be known without the people. To know God involves knowing God's people, and to know the people is to begin to know God. The people reveal God. The people speak the name of God with their lives: to look on Israel is to see the face of God; to experience the life of the people is to discover what God is like.

But Moses wants a name that is more specific; Moses wants a God like all the gods of the land, a God with an identity he can imagine, a God with a name he can use—a proper name for a proper God.

What we discover in this passage is that the God who speaks with flames will not be like all the others, a God with a name like the other gods. Instead, the voice gives a name that is not a name, an identity that is not an identity. The fire speaks an unpronounceable word: "I am who I am," the flames say, according to most translations. In the footnotes of our Bibles, we find other options for how to render the Hebrew into English: "I am what I am," or "I will be what I will be" (Exod. 3:14). We really don't know how to pronounce the word.

In Hebrew, it is four letters, all consonants, no vowels: YHWH—also called the *tetragrammaton*, which means *a word with four letters*. Some people supply a few vowels and guess at a way to say the word. I prefer the

Jewish tradition, which says that guessing at how to pronounce the name violates the sacredness of the name. Instead of trying to turn YHWH into a proper name, with vowels, Jewish tradition creates stand-ins for the name, surrogate words—for example, *Adonai*, which means *my Lord*, or *ha-shem*, which means *the Name*.[2] After all, the whole point of the story is that the voice from the burning bush will not provide Moses, or us, with a proper name, a name that we can use to compare this presence with the other gods. The whole point of the tetragrammaton is to expose our desire to think we can know God with a name, with a special word.[3]

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Deep within the memory of God's people is receiving an unpronounceable name that shatters all our conceptions about God, a name that questions our ways of thinking about God. Moses wants a God who makes sense within his world, but that is not what he gets. God will not allow him to remain comfortable with his own categories for what counts as God, of what kind of thing or person or presence God is supposed to be. This God, Moses learns, is not a God—not an identity that fits within the category of being called "God"—but is instead an overwhelming and unsettling presence: "Remove the sandals from your feet," the flames say to Moses, "for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5).

The whole story teaches us that it is hard to talk about God, at least if we mean the God of this story, of these Scriptures, the God who speaks from a fire, the One who wants to be known through the life of a people who bear this unspeakable name.[4]

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2 Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1996), 45.

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 13, 9, and 1a. 13, 11: "If, however, a name were given to God, not as signifying his nature but referring to him as this thing, regarding him as an individual, such a proper name would be altogether incommunicable and in no way applicable to others." "Even more appropriate is the Tetragrammaton which is used to signify the incommunicable."

4 Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 84: "To speak appropriately of the holy mystery that makes and heals the world, but is not the world nor any item in it, is quite beyond the resources

It has always been difficult to talk about God, to represent God with our words—with pronouns, for example, because She is not a man, nor is He a woman. Or we could say the opposite: that She is kind of like a man, and He is kind of like a woman because all people bear characteristics of the Creator, each life revealing something about the One who has created us. Not one person among us—not one type of person, not one gender, not one sexuality, not one race, not one class—reveals all of who God is. No one is in a position to reveal the fullness of God. We can only stumble over our words as we reach for metaphors, for analogies, always inadequate, always incomplete, but human words are all that we have, so we do the best we can, trying not to lead each other astray.

We are at a loss with our words for God. But this loss is good news because the Holy Spirit leads us into other forms of expression, communication beyond language—to reveal God with our whole lives, not just our words. To disclose the reality of God, the promise of God, with all of who we are—that our lives would bear the identity of God's life.

Revealing God's name through God's people

And all of this brings us back to sexism, to how the church, through the ages, has restricted who has been allowed to represent God, to name God, to display God's life in their own lives. Sexism is a kind of blasphemy, a form of sacrilege because it deprives us of the fullness of God's revelation. Sexism defaces God because it robs us of the fullness of God's image in humans.

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The call to us, from that fiery bush, is to organize church life so as to spell out the name of God the best we can, with who we have here, with the fullness of God revealed in our life together as God's people. That's why gender matters in who we commission to preach and who we authorize to serve communion, who we ask to pray and read the Bible, in who signs up to provide childcare and who serves as congregational leaders. The gender of the people who we commission for these roles is part of how we communicate the

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of language. It is the tragedy of modern Western culture to have fallen victim to the illusion (widely shared by believer and nonbeliever alike) that it is perfectly easy to talk about God."

reality of God. Through us God is gendered, as our lives reveal God's life, the gender-full life of God among us.[5]

Several years ago, we were talking about this passage in our Sunday School class with the seven- and eight-year-olds. After we read the story about the burning bush, I asked them what they thought God's voice sounded like to Moses. They gave so many wonderful answers about the crackling sound of fire and the whispering sound of flames. I remember something that one of the kids said, which is what I have been trying to repeat in my own way in this sermon. When I asked the class what God's voice might sound like today, after a long pause Adah spoke up. She said that God sounds like all of our voices because we learn about God from each other, each of us speaking God's words in our own way.

As a church, we let God speak with who we are and in all that we do, as God becomes flesh in us, as our gendered bodies are taken up into God, as we become the fire of God.

The good news is that God has drawn close to us, close enough to speak His love, to show Her power, through us, all of us. In God's life there are no gender divisions; God is always gender crossing, transgressing the boundaries we have created. This is the reality—this gender crossing—that we reflect as a church, as God's people, as the people who reveal God's name.

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About the author

Isaac S. Villegas serves as a pastor at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in North Carolina and as the president of the governing board of the NC Council of Churches. He is a contributing editor for *Christian Century* and a columnist for *Anabaptist World*.

5 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 68: "the simple throwing up of compensating 'feminine' divine imagery may leave societal relationships between the sexes largely untouched; false apophaticism may leap to the place of 'unknowing', leaving curiously intact the sexual stereotypes it claims to overcome. The safer test for sexism overcome is not so much the purity or balance of an official doctrinal formulation, but the *practical* out-workings of the relationship between the sexes in society and Church."