

## **Called and Identified – Exodus 3:1-15 – September 3, 2017**

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Back in 1990, a movie was released called "Dances with Wolves." The story centered on a Civil War Army Lieutenant named John Dunbar. After becoming a hero in battle, Dunbar chose to be posted out on the frontier. At first, he was wary of his Sioux neighbors, but in time they learned to communicate and trust one another. As he learned their names, he realized that the names were more than just a label for a person but actually described something about the person. One man was called Wind in his Hair, because he was passionate and emotionally charged. A woman was named Stands with a Fist, because as a young girl she stood up against a woman who was abusing her. A boy was called Smiles a Lot, for obvious reasons.

At one point, Dunbar learned that the Sioux people had begun calling him Dances with Wolves, because they saw him interacting with a young wolf back at his army outpost. He was intrigued by this new name. Later in the movie, men from the army came out to the frontier outpost. But by this time, Lieutenant Dunbar had integrated into the Sioux tribe. The soldiers were shocked by his appearance and actions, and they labeled him a traitor. Realizing they could never understand his transformation, he began to speak exclusively in the Sioux language and repeated his name over and over, "I am Dances with Wolves." He could no longer identify himself as an American soldier. He had become a Sioux.

Like the Native Americans, the Hebrew people believed very strongly that a person's name was more than simply a label. Names were important; they had meaning. The very first act of the man Adam in the Garden of Eden was that of naming. God sent to him all the creatures to see what Adam would call them. To know a person's name was to have some bit of power over that person. Knowing a name meant you knew something about them. We've looked at the meaning of names in some of our recent lessons. The name Abraham means "Father of a multitude" and Isaac means "he laughed" – a reminder of his mother's laughter when Rebekah found out she was to give birth at her advanced age.

In our lesson from Exodus this morning we have two characters – Moses and God. Moses was born at a time when it was not safe to be a male Hebrew baby. The Pharaoh had set up a law that all newborn Hebrew boys were to be killed. But Moses' mother hid him when he was born, and then after three months, put him in a basket and set him out on the Nile River. The baby was found by the Pharaoh's daughter and was given the name Moses, which means in Egyptian "son," but in Hebrew means "he who draws out," because she drew him out of the river. Later on, Moses will live up to that name when he draws the Hebrew people out of the water of the Red Sea. But for now, Moses has fled Egypt because he murdered an Egyptian man. He settled in the land of Midian and married Zipporah, the daughter of a priest.

One day Moses was out tending the flocks of his father-in-law. He was leading the animals toward Mt Horeb when he caught a strange sight out of the corner of his eye. He saw a bush on fire, and he examined it for a few moments. He noticed the fire did not consume the bush. It was burning, but it was not being destroyed. The voice of God came to Moses out of the burning bush and called his name "Moses, Moses," and Moses replied, "Here I am."

Here I am. And who is Moses? A Hebrew man, alive only because his mother hid him and the Pharaoh's daughter saved him. A murderer who had to flee his home for his own life. An alien residing in a foreign land. A husband, a father. A shepherd. Certainly, he was no one overly-remarkable.

When the voice from the bush identified itself, "I am the God of your ancestors – of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," Moses hid his face in fear, afraid for his safety. But then God revealed to Moses that God had heard the cries of the Israelites. God knew of their enslavement to Egypt and had a plan to bring the Hebrew people out of their bondage and into a prosperous land that would be their own. And that plan included Moses. In fact Moses was the key. Moses would be sent to face Pharaoh to rescue God's people.

That was a mighty tall order, and Moses was beside himself with fear and insecurity. The objections began to flow from his mouth. "Who am I to do this grand thing?" Moses wondered aloud. Or in other words, "why me?" Why choose me? There's nothing special about me. I am nothing. I have no power or authority. I have no great gifts. Are you sure you have the right guy? This was the call of God for Moses, and all he could do was stutter and stammer about his inferiority.

What Moses said was true; he really had nothing going for him that would help him to stand up to Pharaoh. But what God said next changed everything. God made the one comment that ensured this plan to free the Hebrew people would work. And what did God say to Moses? "I will be with you." Now, Moses really wasn't paying much attention, and he still had some concerns. God had to remind him of who God really was. But the key point is right here. "I will be with you."

Suddenly Moses' identity changed. Not a lot. He was still all those things I mentioned previously. Shepherd, resident alien, husband, etc. But now he could identify himself in a new way. He could now say, "God is with me." And that is the one thing that made all the difference in the world. Now Moses could identify himself in relation to God. And that meant something.

Our individual identity is made up of the roles and characteristics that describe who we are. We can define ourselves by our occupational status or the roles we hold in our families. We may

have strong aspects of our personalities that help define who we are, such as kindness or frugality or creative. But what we believe about ourselves in relation to God also helps us to define ourselves.

I read an article by Enuma Okoro entitled "Name Tags." (from the Journal *Weavings*, XXIII p. 21-22) The article opened with the image of a young boy who came to Sunday School each week with a name tag stuck in the middle of his chest. You've seen them – they read "Hello, my name is..." and there is room for you to write your name in the blank space. Well, this little boy had the same thing written on his tag each week. "Hello, my name is I HAVE A NUT ALLERGY." Of course, many of us know that having a nut allergy is a pretty serious thing, and the boy's parents simply wanted to make sure that their son would not be exposed to any food that would be harmful to him. Hence the name-tag.

The boy obviously had a name and had other important aspects to his personality, but this tag identified him in a strong way. Sometimes the way we are identified can overshadow everything else about us. "See that boy over there?" "Oh yeah, you mean the one with the nut allergy?" The Hebrew people believed that to name something or to know someone's name meant that you had power over that person.

The article I read goes on to challenge us about how we define people based upon the labels we give them. Now obviously there is more to that boy than his allergy to nuts, and we know that. But we assign labels to people to all the time. Think about the people we see on a daily basis. Are there any people we encounter in our lives that we dismiss because of how we label them? What about homeless people? Do we see people standing on the side of the road holding up a sign and a cup and make a judgment about them? What about leather-clad tattooed men and women who ride motorcycles? Or young people with brightly dyed hair and rainbow t-shirts? Women with multiple children in the Walmart parking lot? Or people with skin darker than our own? Do we dismiss some people because of their appearance or actions? Do we overlook others because they are invisible to our critical eyes? And how would we label ourselves? If we had to write something on one of those "Hello, my name is..." tags, what would we say?

How do we identify ourselves? By our moods? By our personal relationships? By our jobs? By our economic status or political party? How we define ourselves often dictates how we define others. "I am in a bad mood today, so I am going to treat everyone poorly." "I am a middle-class citizen and believe that people who live on welfare are lazy." "I belong to this political party and don't trust anyone who affiliate with that political party." The examples go on. The quick answer is to learn to define ourselves as followers of Christ. Sounds easy, right?

When we define ourselves as those who follow Christ, sometimes we find it hard to live up to expectations. Hello my name is...I don't know how to love my neighbor because he drives me up a wall. Hello my name is...I feel envious of people who live in a bigger house and have more stuff than me or who have a more prestigious job. Hello my name is...I could never live out the gospel message, so why bother? Hello my name is...I can't follow Christ, because I am not good enough.

We look at the long list of do's and don'ts found in Romans 12, and we wonder where to begin. The passage (Romans 12:9-21) begins "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." And it continues. The Apostle Paul was writing to the church in Rome, reminding them of how to live out their calling as followers of Christ.

But like Moses could not hope to face the Pharaoh in Egypt without God to stand with him, we cannot hope to live out our calling as followers of Christ without the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. We can only accomplish this calling knowing and believing that God is with us. God told Moses, "I will be with you." We can embrace our identity as followers of Christ knowing that Jesus Christ is with each one of us. Remember in Matthew's gospel, one the first names given to Christ was that of Emmanuel. And remember what Emmanuel means? God with us.

God is with us. That is part of who we are. That is a definitive part of our identity. God is not with us because we deserve it or because we earned it. God is with us by grace. God is with us because God loves us. Period. We need to claim that. And when we do claim it, when we live our lives believing that God is with us because God loves us, it will directly impact how we interact with others.

When we look at others through the lens of God's love we can see past those outward appearances that would normally turn us off. No longer is that simply a person who voted for the other candidate. That is a person who is loved by God. No longer do my eyes sweep over the people who seemed irredeemable to me yesterday. Suddenly they are bathed in the light of God's love, and I am drawn to them. Do I still pull away from those who are different than me, who act in strange ways or say things that offend me? Or do I relate to them as fellow human beings, each one loved by God.

How we are identified says much about who we are and how we will act. Moses could not hope to live up to his calling to free the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt without the presence of God in his life. God has a calling for each one of us – to live as followers of Christ in this world. With our own strength, we couldn't do it. But Jesus Christ promises to be with each one of us. Emmanuel. God with us. Claim that promise. Claim your identity.