

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Mighty Acts of God: God Plans”  
Rev. Joanne Blair  
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Exodus 3:13-22; Matthew 21:23-32

What’s in a name? Do you know what your name means? After reading today’s passage from Exodus, I started to wonder about my own name. I know that some form of “Ann” follows back through the females on my mother’s side, but we have so little family history that I don’t know why, or where it began.

My given name is “Joanne Lynne” and I know that my dad wanted the “e” on the end of both names because he thought it was pretty and more feminine, but that’s about all I know.

When I looked up the meaning of my name, I learned that Joanne means “God is gracious”, and that Lynne means “from the lake, or beautiful waterfall.”

I like those definitions, and their meanings are poetic and lyrical, but I also know that is not why I was named as I was. My parents just liked the names, and it worked “Ann” into the picture.

In the ancient world, names were given with great intention, thought and meaning. Moses meaning “drawn out of the water” is a perfect example.

(Just as a side note, notice that Jesus was named before he was born, and Jesus means “God is salvation.”)

Someone’s name said something about the nature of the person who bore the name.

And so it is no wonder that Moses asks God what God’s name is, for he wants to learn something about this God, just like the names of Egypt’s gods said something about them.

Moses not only needed a name to give to others, he needed a name to express by whose power, qualifications and authority he was acting. Moses is essentially asking, “Who are you to send me before Pharaoh? Who are you to be promising deliverance? Who are you to set Israel free from Pharaoh?”

And so, God tells him.

Verse 14 from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Exodus is one of the most puzzled over verses in the whole Hebrew Bible. You cannot translate it exactly.

Most common is “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.”

God continues to reveal God’s name in verse 15, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord [Yahweh], 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.”

As God recruits and directs Moses, God is laying out God’s plans for the Israelites. God will not only take them to freedom, God will give them a future and the prospect of land... which leads to security. This is the future God promised to Abraham so long ago. And God keeps God’s promises, as a redistribution of wealth and of power is projected.

Just as God challenged the power (and the misuse of it!) with Pharaoh, so Jesus challenged the power (and the misuse of it!) with the religious leaders of his day.

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is not exactly one of the most beloved parables, and it has several faces. One face of this parable speaks to Jesus' controversy with the chief priests and Pharisees... and hence, to all who abuse and misuse their power.

It speaks to all those who have harmed or been harmed by the socially, religiously, and economically powerful. It reminds all of us of the promise of eventual divine justice and righteousness.

But this parable can also leave us with a feeling of impatience and frustration. Why would God allow a bunch of tenants to partake in such violence? Why didn't God do something? And why doesn't God do something about all of the violence and suffering in the world today?

You pick any news source and there are so many examples of people suffering. The events of the past couple of months certainly demonstrate this point in a myriad of ways. Natural disasters and a plethora of human-made tragedies.

So many, and so big.

At times we feel helpless and hopeless.

The image of the vineyard in today's parable which comes from Isaiah 5 was meant to be a symbol for Israel. Today, that same symbol represents the world, and we are now the tenants. And we need to be good tenants. We have been given a responsibility to care for this world and all that is in it, but sometimes we confuse this responsibility with power. Too often we forget to whom the vineyard belongs, and we try to keep it for ourselves.

Sometimes it is intentional as we try to grab and hold on to all we can for our own elevation and use. But often it is unintentional. We're good people. We provide and care for ourselves and those close to us... those in each of our own "personal circles." Yet we are called to go beyond that. We are called to love and provide and care for those outside of "our circle" as well.

We often forget that the world belongs to God, and not to us. It's easy to do.

I want to share something I came across. I have abbreviated it and I apologize that I cannot cite the author. "If we believe that we are the new tenants, then how are we doing? Are we harvesting the fruit of witness and compassion, mission and transformation? When the owner backs up the trucks to load the harvest, what will we have to load? Is the landowner pleased with us, the new keepers of the vineyard, or should we feel his judgement too? Whatever has happened in the past, the landowner still likes his fruit. Are we producing the kingdom harvest that the owner was hoping for?"

This quote makes me wonder what my own personal harvest looks like. What can I do to make it more abundant? And what do the harvests of this community look like?

Both of our Scripture readings today are about justice, and the usurping of unjust power. God continuously desires to be in relationship with us, and to have us be part of God's team. But we must never forget to whom the ultimate power belongs.

"I am who I am. I will be who I will be."

Israel had to wait for her deliverance, but it did come. Such is the pledge, the sureness, and the hope of all who know the Lord and trust in God's active presence in the world. We cannot chart the workings of God on a computer or with a slide rule. We cannot know what God will do next, but we can freely choose to submit ourselves to align with God's will.

"I am who I am"... "I will be who I will be" ... God is unchangeable in that God is always planning for justice. Our parents named us with or without much intention... yet God calls each and every one of us by name with great intention to be a part of God's plan for the restoration of God's Kingdom.

And so the question this week is: What has God called me to do in restoring justice in this world? And how am I answering that call?