

Putting a Face to a Name

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Exodus 1:15-22; 3:1-15

WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF THIS STRANGE THING?

I don't know how many of you joined me last Sunday night when at about 10:00 I stepped outside my home and looked into the sky and witnessed what has been referred to as "the super blood moon". Likely, at least, you read about it in the newspaper or the internet or saw it on TV. The super blood moon is a convergence of astronomical cycles when the moon passes closest in its orbit to the earth and thus appears 14% bigger and at the same time is eclipsed by the earth's shadow creating a large orange moon. It must be a good sign; the last time it happened was thirty-three years ago in 1982, the year I was married. One of the best things I ever did.

And yet as I stood in my driveway watching this shadow fall across the moon and this orange hue appearing it made me wonder about our ancient forbearers long ago -- who spent a lot more time stargazing than we do -- primarily because they didn't have 563 TV channels to watch at night -- and without the benefits of telescopes and the findings of astronomical science -- observing such a rare phenomenon, sometimes happening once in a lifetime -- you can only imagine what wonderments this elicited. What does this mean that the moon has fallen into shadow -- that the

evening orb has taken on such ominous color? For many the question would have been, What are the heavens, or what is God trying to say? It's why, of course, we find in the Bible references to the blood moon, because the ancients asked these questions -- What is God trying to say through such an unusual natural occurrence?

We ask this of other unusual natural occurrences. Think of a rainbow. Not something that happens every day and when it does we usually go "Ah". We know scientifically how rainbows occur -- the refraction of light across water droplets in the atmosphere -- nevertheless people of faith are reminded of the Bible story that asked the question, What is God trying to say through this colorful bow in the sky? Answer: That he would never again destroy the world through a flood. Though this summer in Southwest Florida we were beginning to wonder.

And so Moses in chapter 3 of Exodus after having had quite an early life -- from his merciful delivery by courageous midwives, his perilous voyage down river in a basket, raised by Pharaoh's family, murdering an Egyptian to protect his people, and then self-imposed exile in the Sinai desert -- Moses has had quite a life up until now. But then comes the day when a strange thing occurs. Out in the wilderness Moses sees a burning bush. Now he's seen burning bushes before -- quite common in the arid wilderness with its many lightning strikes. But there is something uncommon about this burning bush -- it doesn't stop burning. And when Moses turns aside and approaches he asks his question, What might God be trying to say through this unusual occurrence?

And sure enough God says something. In this deeply mystical and mysterious moment God speaks to Moses and God says that he is to go back Egypt to deliver his people from slavery. This is quite a moment, to say the least. Literally a life changing moment.

Now when a man encounters the presence and call of God that tells him in no uncertain terms that he must totally upend his life I can only imagine that there would be an urge to understand more. Who are you that you would ask such a thing? And so Moses would just like to know the name of this God who has called him to upend his life. What shall I say is your name? He asks almost the exact same question that Jacob asked last week in his wrestling m a t c h .

Remember Jacob wrestling with God last week and he asks, What is your name? And the mysterious one says nothing. Doesn't answer the question. So Moses asks the voice in the burning bush, What is your name? And the voice says, "I am who I am". Not the kind of answer Moses was expecting. And maybe that's a way of God saying that maybe Moses is asking the wrong question. I am who I am, God says. I am too big for a name. I am simply who I am. And you will find me not as much by name ... but by what is to occur.

And so maybe that explains that when Jacob asks God to give up his name and God does not answer -- that something even more wonderful happens. Because after Jacob limps away from his wrestling with God who should he run into? He runs into the person he least wants to run into -- his brother. And he doesn't want to see his brother because the last time he saw his brother his brother wanted him dead. Jacob had cheated Esau out of everything he had -- and Esau had no use for him. So when Jacob sees Esau he is expecting his own death. He is expecting the look on his face to be one of anger and spite and vengeance.

But when Jacob sees Esau's face all he sees is mercy. Mercy. Grace and mercy. Forgiveness and reconciliation. And Jacob says, I may not know God's name, but I have seen God's face. I have seen

God's face in the merciful expression of my brother.

I may not know God's name, but I have seen God's face.

And I wonder if that isn't the good news for us today. Because you know the truth is not many of us can claim a burning bush experience. Not many of us have heard God speak from the clouds or speak from the moon or speak from a burning bush. Some of us, perhaps, but not many of us. But I wonder if maybe the good news today

“We find God not in a name, but in a face.”

is that God, who is too big for a name, does in fact show up in many ways and in many places – far past a name. I wonder if God doesn't show up most of all in the faces of his people. We find God not in a name, but in a face.

Thomas Lewis and his psychiatrist colleagues in their great book on love – called *A General Theory of Love* – talk about how perhaps the most important moments in a newborn's life is when he or she connects with the loving kindness of his or her mother's or father's face. This is the moment of security – the smiling, loving, expressive face of a parent. It is the face that speaks something that words cannot speak. For months a baby does not understand what is said, but understands everything in that face looking into his eyes. It's why of course in our texts and emails we put our smiley faces and frowny faces and teary faces – because a face says more than words. A face is more important than even a name.

And don't you think that might explain that when the people of Israel told the story of Moses and wrote down the story of Moses they were sure to include the story of those midwives. Remember those midwives? Puah and Shiphrah. Those courageous Hebrew women who when Pharaoh said that it was their job to keep those Hebrew boys from living – it was those courageous Hebrew midwives who heard the call of God to upend their lives, put their lives at stake, and make sure those baby boys lived. So that when little baby Moses comes into the world what is the first thing he sees. He sees the face. He sees

the face of mercy and compassion and kindness and courage. He sees Puah. Or maybe he sees Shiphrah. These amazing, courageous, merciful women and in their faces he sees the face of God.

I'm going to bet that the most significant spiritual experiences you've had came with a face. The face of mercy, the face of grace, the face of sympathy, the face of compassion, the face of joy, the face of understanding. God shows up in the faces of his people.

I've told you before of that Christmas Day back when I was 16 and I was driving on my learner's permit with the family in the car on the way to grandma and grandpa's house for Christmas. And I lost control of the car and slammed 55 mph into a telephone pole. It was one of the worst days of my life. Ambulances, police cars, emergency room doctors, broken bones. It was awful. But what I didn't tell you was the moment when my father pulled me aside, he and I were the only ones who walked away unscathed, and he walked me down the emergency room hallway and sat me down with my head hung low. And he said, "Look at me. Look at me." And when I raised my head of shame and there it was. The face. The face of mercy. And he said, "It's OK. It's going to be OK."

God shows up in the faces of his people. Burning bush? Blood moon? Not so often. But God shows up in the faces of his people.

So the Christian world gathers today – from every tribe and nation – the world gathers today around the table of Jesus. The One who humbles himself even to take on a name. Jesus of Nazareth. But it's not the name we're after today.

It's the face. The merciful face of the one who has invited us here. Who calls us in from all those hard places we've been. From our broken places. And he says, Look at me. It's OK. You're loved.

And maybe today we see him most of all in each other's faces. The faces of the world gathered together looking into each other's eyes. And to see perhaps the mercy of Jesus' face reflected in our own. It's what they said about Moses you know. That when he met God face to face his face shone. And what greater calling could there be but to be the face of God? To each other and to all those who just need a little mercy. If only to know it's going to be OK.



Putting a Face to a Name

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

October 4, 2015

Church of the Palms

© 2015 Church of the Palms

3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323