

Devotion – Eighteenth Week after Pentecost

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As I finish up a discussion of names in Hebrew, I'd like to look at names that have God's name included in them. If a name ends in "-iah," it means the Lord. So the name Isaiah means "salvation of the Lord." Names beginning with "Jeho-" or "Jo" also mean the Lord. So the name Jehoshaphat means "the Lord judges." Jehoshaphat was the 4th king of the divided kingdom in Judah, and Chronicles tells us he walked in the ways of his ancestor David as a strong king. The name Joab means "the Lord is my father." Joab was the nephew of David and was the commander of his army. Jeshua, or Joshua, means "the Lord is salvation." This is Jesus' real name in Hebrew – "Jesus" is an Aramaic translation. An apt name for the Messiah – the one who saves us.

Names beginning or ending with "el" also mean God. The ancient Canaanite name for the highest God in the pantheon of all gods was "El." Older parts of the Old Testament use "El" for God rather than "YHWH." The name Ezekiel means "God strengthens," and Bethel means "House of God." That is where Jacob falls asleep, dreaming of a ladder stretching to heaven. When he wakes up, he thinks "this is a sacred place. It is God's house and the entrance to heaven," so he names the place "Bethel." Another name used for Jesus from Isaiah's prophecy is Emanuel, which means "God with us." A fitting title for Jesus, don't you think?

So we have all these names that use syllables that stand for God. However, in Exodus 3, when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and Moses has all kinds of excuses not to go save his people, he asks God who he should say sent him to these people. God answers – "YHWH," or "I am who I am," actually better translated as "I will be what I will be." This name for God first appears in Genesis 2:4, after the story of the 7 days of creation, where God is called Elohim, "the supreme God." This older name for God gets changed to YHWH in the Genesis story when God personally creates the human, Adam, out of the dirt. The Genesis 2 story is a newer story than the 7 days of creation, probably written down during the Babylonian exile in the 6th century B.C. I find this switch in name related to Adam and Eve fascinating.

Scholars have debated for years what YHWH really means. I think it means what it says – this creator is the creator, and what that means depends on what God decides to create or do. God is just bigger than anything we can understand. God is beyond a shape or a size or a physical body. God is everywhere in every time and every space. God can't be nailed down with a real name – God is beyond a name. This name, YHWH, is so sacred that when the temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, the religious scholars forbid anyone to say that name. Instead, they were to use the word Adonai, or "Lord." To this day many faithful Jews never speak the word YHWH, but only "Lord," followed by "bless his holy name." Similarly, Muslims call the Lord, "Allah, bless his holy name," the Arabic form of God.

I am comforted by the knowledge that our creator, the omnipresent, omniscient force in this universe, can't really be named. YHWH is who YHWH is. YHWH will be who YHWH will be. We cannot really fathom all that God is or God will be. We believe that God is present with us now, that God has always been, and that God will always be. God sent his son, Jeshua/Joshua/Jesus, to be a physical presence on this earth at a specific place and time. That also gives me comfort – I call it having God with "skin on." We can look to Jesus as the example of what God wishes for humanity.

I have days when I look at the sky, with all those stars, and think of this YHWH who created all that we see, which is such a small part of the universe. It's all bigger than we can imagine. We are such a tiny little dot in the universe. And yet YHWH created us in YHWH's image. YHWH yearns for us to be in relationship, just like YHWH walked through the evening breeze in the Garden of Eden, yearning to talk to the earthlings YHWH had made out of the dust and a rib. YHWH still yearns for us, even though we often disobey and make a mess of everything. YHWH never gives up on us, even though we at times give up on ourselves. A comforting thought as we live each day in a world of conflict. YHWH will be to us what YHWH will be – a presence that is so big we can't even fully grasp it, except to be thankful. Bless the holy name of our creator.

May your week be one of grace and peace.

Jeanne