

GOD AS "I AM"

What do the names for God mean? IN the Hebrew Bible, God is El-Roy, El-Shadai, Eloheim and ... Yahweh. Yahweh is of particular interest because it was the special name given to Moses at the burning bush. What is the meaning of this name? What does it mean that God revealed this name to Moses? How did Jesus use this name? These are the questions we will explore in the following Rest Stops.

REST STOP #1: The Sacred Name of God

God has many names in the Bible. In our English texts, the different names don't stand out as much or strike us as odd; their meanings are hidden in a different language and time. "Jehovah Jireh" we sing during worship, and wonder what that really means. Or we say, "So what?" What's the big deal?

Names were very significant in ancient times. Parents carefully chose names for their children, because names revealed the inner qualities and unique characteristics of the person. Later in life, a person might receive a new name as a result of some new accomplishment or new revelation from God. In some ancient cultures, names were so special that to know someone's personal name was to know their secret source of strength or life. When people revealed their personal name to others, this was a very intentional step toward relationship. They made themselves almost vulnerable by revealing their true identity. To know someone's name was to know—really know—that person.

So what does it mean that God revealed the name of YHWH—yoh, hey, vah, hey—Yahweh, to Moses on lonely Mt. Horeb? What does it mean that the creator of the universe, the Almighty God, confronts a shepherd in the wilderness and tells him—the Name?

It means a lot. God, through a burning bush that would not burn up, initiated relationship with a human. God revealed something of the divine mystery to a humble shepherd. "I am that I am." The name is so sacred that today many religious people do not even say that Name. Our Bibles print out LORD in capital letters as a way to respect the unmentionable Name. Some Jewish rabbis postulate that the four letters—yoh, hey, vah, hey—almost sound like breathing when spoken together. The name of God is the very breath we take to sustain life?

Does God become vulnerable to Moses, to us, in the giving of this name? Does God give us a hint of the divine nature by the meaning of these letters? I AM.

I AM. Forever fully present. The One who makes all other things be.

REST STOP #2: Be Still and Know that I Am God

This month I received a catalog in the mail that featured all sorts of novelty gifts. One such gift was a plaque that quoted Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." There was a movement to the words within the artwork. Descending downward, the words at the end of each phrase dropped off to form similar yet distinct messages. It went something like this:

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I Am
Be still and know
Be still
Be

The words caught my attention, enough that I stopped to just . . . be for a moment. But for \$24.95 I wasn't ready to be the owner of such a plaque. Besides, there's more to that verse in Psalms. The plaque, interesting as it was, reflected some of the misunderstanding we have about the great "I Am," and about this verse in particular.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with being still and knowing that God . . . is. But when we use this verse and subsequently the name of God that means "I am that I am" simply as a command to live the contemplative life, we miss a lot of the meaning.

Psalm 46:10 is a Holy War verse.

"Be still and know that I am God" has little to do with quiet prayer in a peaceful garden, where one serenely gives her cares over to a loving Master. It has everything to do with looking over your shoulder and seeing a huge army descending upon you. "Be still and know that I am God" is the command for facing the enemy. "Be still" is what we are supposed to do in times of war.

The original context for Psalm 46:10 comes from Exodus 14:13-14. God had just rescued the slaves from the cruel Pharaoh in Egypt. Ten plagues had broken the king's spirit, and now the slaves were hurrying to the Sinai desert before Pharaoh changed his mind. But they didn't go fast enough, for the king did change his mind and was now in hot pursuit. Unorganized, no weapons, just a mass of people including children, and even worse, the Red Sea lay before them—they were trapped and hopeless. The Red Sea before them and an angry mass behind them. They cried out to Moses, their leader. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die?" They were desperate. They faced the enemy—and death.

This is the first example of Holy War in the biblical narrative. Yahweh's brand of Holy War. Be still and know that I Am.

Don't move.

Exodus 14:13-14 reads like this: "Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.'"

You need only to be still.

Psalm 46 echoes the wartime theme. Look at the verses surrounding verse 10.

(Verse 8-9) "Come and see the works of the LORD,
the desolation he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear,

He burns the shields with fire.

(Verse 11) "The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Perhaps the maker of the small plaque was thinking about Holy War and about how we are to trust God to fight our enemies. But the little pink flowers that wound around the words like a gentle vine would seem to indicate otherwise.

But even if the plaque-maker didn't get it, we do. It's a comfort to me that "Be still and know that I Am God" means something more than quiet prayer. My life isn't all pink, winding flowers. Contemplation in a garden is fine, but it doesn't feel like reality when the enemy is breathing down your neck.

But then again, if God is really going to fight for us, if all we really have to do when evil assails us is—be still, then maybe we truly can relax, and contemplate, and just be.

REST STOP #3: The "I Am" Statements in John

In the gospel of John, Jesus is described by seven "I AM's." I am the good shepherd, I am the vine, I am the door, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life and I am the resurrection. The "I am" phrase in Greek is intentional. Most Jews of Jesus' time, out of reverence for the holy name of God, would avoid using "I am." But Jesus is intentional, even to the point of explicit connection to Yahweh. "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58)

Jesus identified himself as YHWH. One way, then, to better understand YHWH is to reflect on these "I am" statements from John.

The following are prayer stations suggestions, using the "I am" statements of Jesus.

I am the Bread of Life:

Needed:

- Loaves of bread
- Table and tablecloth
- Instructions (see below)

I am the bread of life

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life."

What does that mean?

He's as common as Wonderbread?

Stale as a heel?

Dry and crumbly?

Or . . . warm and tasty and full of aroma?
Fresh baked bread.

Or maybe bread means life to you?
What some people wouldn't do for just a bite of bread.
They are so, so hungry.
They can hardly stand the pain in their gut.
Bread—they'd do anything for bread.

What about you?
How is Jesus bread for you?
Crusty loaf?
Same old, same old?
Warm and pleasant to taste?
Or your last hope. Your salvation.
Literally.

What are you hungry for?
Really?

Take a bite of the bread before you.
And pray for true hunger.

I am the vine

Needed:

- English ivy or grapevines or some other kind of vine, growing in a pot
- Dead vines
- Table and tablecloth
- Instructions (see below)

I am the vine

Jesus said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener."

And us?

We are the branches.

Do you want to be a branch?

There's not a lot of freedom, being connected to some big vine.

What an inconvenience—in a sense.

What a nuisance.

I mean, you can't go anywhere, really.

And what about the gardener?

Do you want to be . . . tended?

Maybe tended yes, but pruned?

That sounds painful.

Isn't it better to let the branches go straggly?

Finding their own way rather than to get pinched off?

Pinching hurts.

Connected, pruned, stuck

But growing.

Drinking in the nutrients of the vine.

Look at the branches on the table.

Which one is the most like you?

The straggly one in the corner?

The really green one, but no fruit?

That small one close to the stem?

Or one of the dead ones?

The dead ones are free

But they're dead.

Who are you?

I am the door

Needed:

- 3 doors that go into 3 separate rooms (you may want to have this prayer station in a Sunday School hallway)
- 3 signs that say, "I am the door." Put them on each of the three doors.
- Inside the left room, place these instructions and a Bible on a table. "Pray and trust. If you seek me, you will find me."
- Inside the right door, place these instructions and a Bible on a table. "'See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction . . .now choose life.' (Deut. 30:15-19) Know my child, that I will love you no matter what you choose. But also know that one way leads to joy more than the other. Choose wisely."
- Inside the center door, place these instructions and a Bible on a table. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6. Trust. Obey. Relax. God will not lead you astray.
- Instructions (see below)

Before you there are three doors.

They represent some directions you could take

As you make that big decision in your life right now.

That big decision that looms over you.

Take a moment and think about what is involved in this big decision.

Does this decision have to do with your spiritual life?

Jesus says that all decisions, all of life

Has to do with him.

So . . .how do you choose what to do?

If Jesus is the door

That leads to God

And God is life and light and love

And joy . . .

How do you know which door to choose?

If you know what Jesus would have you do in your biggest decision right now
And you are ready to say yes to that,
Take the middle door.

If you have no idea what Jesus wants you to do concerning this big decision,
Take the left door.

If you know what Jesus wants you to do—and you just can't do it yet,
Go to the door on your right.

REST STOP #4: Burning Bushes and Other Weird Things

Moses saw a burning bush. He saw a bush on fire, but the flames did not consume the leaves or the branches. It was a miracle.

And it was also a paradox. Burning bushes that don't burn? That makes no sense. Something that can't be—is. And Moses "turned aside" as the Bible says and noticed it. He noticed the paradox.

Could it be that God would speak to us as well—through the paradoxes in our lives? The things that shouldn't be but are nonetheless? The people who should hate each other but love each other instead? The idea that God is altogether holy and altogether merciful? The tension of discipleship and grace?

But we, like Moses, must turn aside. We must be on the watch, on the ready to sit and listen to the voice inside the paradox.

What are your burning bushes?

Take off your shoes. This is holy ground.