



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 17, 2013
The First Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

+
A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
on
Exodus 20:7
+

Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 4: TAKING THE NAME IN VAIN

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” (RSV)

I received a lesson, pretty early in life, on what it means to take the Lord’s name in vain. It had to do with a hammer. Specifically, a contractor doing work in our house one time; in the course of this work, swinging the hammer down with the goal of driving in a nail, the hammer went awry, and apparently landed, instead, directly on his finger. At that point, he let out a series of words that though I had heard some of them before, whispered among my classmates, I had certainly never heard an adult say them, out loud, and certainly never in front of my mother. With a withering glare at the contractor, she quickly hustled me out of the room, looked me in the eye, and said sternly, “The Bible says we should not take the Lord’s name in vain.” Indeed.

I actually feel bad for that poor man, who no doubt still bears the marks of the verbal lashing I’m sure he received out of my earshot. But the third commandment is not really about using “bad words,” as they say; it’s a commandment about a particular word and, specifically, a particular name. So this afternoon there are three questions about the third commandment that I’d like to explore. First, and most basically: what is the name of the Lord? Second, why is it so important that it can’t be used “in vain”? And third, what does any of this have to do with the gospel?

So, first: when Moses and the Israelites were told that it was the “name of the Lord your God” that couldn’t be taken in vain, what was that name?

We find it in the book of Exodus. After God gives Moses his marching orders, to send him into Egypt and to “tell old Pharaoh, let my people go,” Moses asks, “And when I do, when I tell them that the God of our fathers has sent me to lead them, they’re going to ask me, ‘Well, who is the god of our fathers? What is his name?’ And what should I say?” And God answers, “‘I AM WHO I AM.’ ... ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14, RSV). The Hebrew for what is (somewhat awkwardly) translated there as “I AM”—in other words, for what is taken to be the name of God—has traditionally been represented in text by the four Hebrew consonants *YHWH*, and this is referred to as the “Tetragrammaton,” which means, literally, “the four letters.” *YHWH*, vowels omitted. So when this

same Moses is being given the commandments, he already knows what God's name is, because it had been revealed to him.¹

This gives us an insight into our second question: what is so important about the name that it can't be used in vain? And what does it mean for a name to be used "in vain," anyway? After all, there are several different ways for something to be "in vain." For instance, I might say, "I went to visit my friend yesterday, but he wasn't home; therefore, my trip was in vain." Or, you might say to your dinner companion this evening, "I went to church today to learn about the ten commandments, but the preacher was terrible, so my effort was in vain." There is something like that in this usage; to use the Lord's name in a way that is empty, or futile, is prohibited. But we may also say that to use the name "in vain" would be to treat it as common, pedestrian, when it's anything but. The truth is that the revelation of the divine name to Moses was also, implicitly, a revelation of God's grace. It's no coincidence that the revelation of the name happened at the same time that God made the promise of the exodus from slavery in Egypt, saving Israel when Israel could not save itself.

God's promise of the exodus was shocking news, and the Israelites, and we, might ask the same questions: "Who is this god of freedom? Who is this god of passover? Who is this god of love?" The answer is the same: "Tell them I AM sent you." With those words, God's seal was affixed to this promise; his signature was scrawled prominently on the bottom of a contract, the terms of which only he would keep. No matter: his name would not be revealed in vain.

Since knowing the divine name is inseparable from the promise of salvation, given directly to the people of Israel, it's no wonder that they treated it as holy in its own right. They called upon God by name only once a year, at the climax of the Day of Atonement, and then only by the chief priest in the Temple and, since the destruction of the Temple, never again. When it appears in Hebrew scriptures (which it does frequently), it's given in its abbreviated, four-letter, and unspoken, form. For most of its history, the Christian Church followed this prohibition as well, and it's worth noting that even as recently as five years ago the Roman Catholic magisterium re-affirmed that this Hebrew name of God should not be used in liturgy or in Biblical translations.² The divine name itself is reserved, special, and holy.

This may shed some light on our third question: what does this have to do with the gospel? A consequence of the fact that God's holiness is such that Israel made it a practice not even to say God's name—a consequence of God's complete "other-ness," beyond words or images—is to sharpen the scandal of the Incarnation. And indeed, it is a scandal, because the claim being made by Christians is that the divine name is applicable not only to the God worshiped by Israel, but applicable also to a specific human person: to Jesus of Nazareth. There was a recognition of this very early in the Christian tradition³; it was a realization that there had been a person, born in Bethlehem to a young Jewish girl, who was the bearer of the divine, unspeakable name. It would take centuries of considered deliberation, even a new theological vocabulary, to figure out how to articulate how that was so, but the devotional impulse was there already. The Son of God bore the unspeakable name of God.

The Lord God, who, Scripture makes clear, is not like us, has—shockingly—become like us in every way, except sin. The God who is beyond words or images has become flesh; he has shown his unveiled

¹ Though compare Isaiah 42:8 ("I am the Lord; that is my name") and Genesis 4:26b ("At that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord").

² See <http://old.usccb.org/liturgy/NameOfGod.pdf>

³ See Charles A. Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57, no. 2 (May 1, 2003): 115–158.

face, to save us, who, like the Israelites, cannot save ourselves. And with the incarnation, the exodus that he provides isn't out of Egypt; it's out of death itself. His signature on that covenant is written in blood, not the blood of the Egyptians, but his own blood. The same God that revealed himself in part to Moses was then fully revealed in the incarnate Messiah, without reservation, and for that reason he could be addressed as "Lord" and, yes, even as "God," having been given "the name that is above every name," the divine name; God's own name (Phil 2:9).

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." No, because his name is holy, and we find in it an assurance of the good news of God's saving grace—for Israel, and for the world.

In the Name of God. *Amen.*