

Homily
March 20, 2022
3rd Sunday of Lent
26:54 – 35:28

We have heard of the patience and compassion of God in the Gospel and that wonderful parable about the fig tree. We proclaimed it in our Psalm today as well. God waits. God is patient. God would care for us. And he continues to extend that to us.

But then there's Moses in the First Reading. Moses had to have tried the Lord's patience, just a little bit because he kept asking, "What's your name?" And even after he declares that I am the God of Abraham and of Jacob and of Isaac, he still says, "What's your name?"

And so, God gives him that wonderful, almost smart-alecky response. At least that's the way I hear it sometimes, "I AM, Who AM." What? **What?!** So then he repeats, "Tell the people 'I AM' sent you." **What?!** Why is God so particular about God's name?

In the ancient world, to know someone's name and to use it was to have power over them. You recognize that, right? Julie, don't you once in a while just cry out, "John!!" Does he come? Sometimes. But there's a power in knowing someone's name. Even we have it. That's not quite what this means in the ancient world, but God does not allow us, or them at that time, to have power over God. We may call upon God. We may beseech God. But we cannot control God. Thus, God's virtually smart-aleck remark, "I AM, Who AM."

Now our Jewish ancestors, as well as Jews today, treat God's name with just as much reverence. They actually have seven names for God. These are official names that when Jews write them down, they cannot erase them. That would be to have power over God. And there is the one famous name, the **tetragrammaton**. "Tetra" in Greek means "four." And it's made up of four letters, **Y H W H**, in English. And a Jew will never say that name. They will use one of the other six as a substitute. So instead of saying the tetragrammaton, they will bow their head and say, "Adonai," or "Elohim," or "El," or "Shaddai," or one of the other substitutes.

And I know for having dealt with Jewish rabbis, here in town in my work with the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, that if I write a letter, or the bishop does to the rabbis, we always are sure that we write, "G-d." We never complete the name of God because that's the way they do it. They have such reverence for the name of God.

Our Islamic brothers and sisters, as well, have a great reverence. But they only have one name for God: **Allah**. Now we know our Islamic brothers and sisters will say, "Allahu Akbar," which basically

means, “God is great.” And they will also say, “Inshallah,” which means, “If God wills it.” (We would say, “God willing.”) They don’t try to control the future. They just say, “Inshallah.” If God wills it. Just one name.

Now Muslims have 99 attributes that they speak of God. But only one name. And when they say that name, “Allah,” they bow their head – always. Palestinian Arabic Christians also call God, “Allah,” because it’s an Arabic word. And they, too, honor it.

In English, we have one word. God. Oh, yes. We can say the Trinity. Correct? Which for us calls to mind the powerful, wonderful, mysterious relationship of God as Father, Son and Spirit. We will say, “Lord,” at times. Yes? But we really have only one name for God... **“God.”**

In our culture however, how often is God’s name trivialized?

“Oh, for God’s sakes!” Okay?!

Sometimes we will add a word behind “God,” which will get us in a lot of trouble if your parents catch you doing it. I know. It happened once behind the garage and my mother caught me. I was taken by the ear, dragged into the house, cleaned-up and sent immediately to the church – with my father driving – to go to Confession. It was a horrible experience.

Or, **“Jesus Christ!”** You ever done that?

We could go on and on with ways that we just trivialize God’s name. But with the honor that God holds God’s own name, “I AM, Who AM”; with the honor we see in the other two Abrahamic religions - Judaism and Islam – how they hold in great esteem God’s name -- I believe this week during Lent we are encouraged to ask ourselves, “How do I use God’s name. How do I honor it? With gesture. With how I speak it. When I speak it. And how it is used.”

It could be a wonderful exercise for our season of Lent, don’t you think?

I’ll give you a little help if you want to do this. The Psalms have God’s name littered throughout. In fact, they talk about the Lord’s name, God’s name: Psalm 8, Psalm 23, Psalm 113, Psalm 116, Psalm 145 – those are the ones I can easily remember. Did I say Psalm 23? Yes. I did. Pour over some of the Psalms and let that be part of your holding God’s name in great esteem. And let it become a part of your daily life.