

We are in week two of a five-week series in Exodus 34 with a focus on Lent. Depending on your background and how you were raised, you may be thinking to yourself, "What even is Lent? Like I've heard of it, but I don't really get it or know what it is." If that's you, believe me, you're not alone. But on the flip side, it's definitely worth knowing.

Lent traces its origins back to the 4th century, AD 325, at a gathering of church leaders known as the Council of Nicea. Lent has origins that are older than all of Islam by several hundred years; it's a very old and long-established practice of a 40-day (or 46-day, depending on how you count) focused season of prayer, repentance, and fasting that begins with Ash Wednesday and concludes with either Holy Thursday or Resurrection Sunday. It is a time that is intended to help Christians see themselves, their condition, and their plight a little more clearly.

You may remember that intimate scene in Genesis 2 where God reaches down and from the dust of the ground forms and breathes his Spirit, his ruach, into the nostrils of Adam, of man. In the next chapter, as man and woman grieve and sin against God, he looks at Adam and promises that for the rest of time, Adam will eat by the sweat of his brow and through painful toil until he returns to the ground—"For dust you are, and to dust you will return."

So it is, with this reality in mind, that we slowdown in this season and remember our sin condition, repent, and look ahead with hope that just as Jesus went into the grave and rose from the dead, so will we who have placed our hope, trust, and faith in him.

One of the ways that CPC is doing that this year is to spend some focused time meditating on keywords from Exodus 34. What we want you to do, see, and ask in this season is not simply: Is there a God, or Do I believe in God? Rather, we want to ask a better question: Who is God?

Many of you have looked at me and have asked a similar question, some version of "Who is the new guy? Who is Josh?" Imagine if my only response to that

question was: I exist. I am 6'0" tall and have brown hair.

All of those things may be true, yet none of them help you to know the real me. There are other things in mind when you ask that question, which involves where I grew up, what my faith story is, who my family is, and maybe even what my hobbies are.

Exodus 34:6-7 is that moment for God; it's that time when he connects with Moses in such a meaningful way that he begins to reveal not just his name but even what he is like, what matters to him. Much like you and me, God, YHWH, is a person, not a human, but a person. And it is our desire to know that person and his personality.

Last week, we walked through the meaning of the divine name, "YHWH, YHWH." This week, we turn our attention to the next few words of verse 6: "The compassionate and gracious God." "A God merciful and gracious" (NRSV). "A God of mercy and grace" (The Message). This is what YHWH, YHWH wants us to know about him. This is part of who he is.

What these words begin to reveal to the reader is a couple of critical things: They say something incredible about God. They say something incredible about us. Let's start with God, and then we'll finish with us.

If you have only known life in the United States, you might already be inclined to miss part of the significance of these words because you may have only ever known life through a Western lens, a Western worldview, one that is primarily Judeo-Christian. You've grown up in a culture that, almost without exception, ascribes all things to one Creator God. If that's you, you may already be missing part of what God is saying to Moses in this passage.

For those of you who are just getting to know me a little bit, while I have years of experience in full-time ministry with 10+ years of that time right here on the Peninsula, for the last three years, I have worked in the corporate world, in tech.

For much of that time, I have either worked alongside or supervised dozens of amazing people internationally and most commonly in India. All throughout

the year, they would remind me that they would be out next week or next month because they were celebrating a particular holiday or a particular festival.

In some cases, I may not have ever heard of some of these celebrations, and so to make conversation, I would ask, "Oh, what is that festival about?" and almost always, it was a celebration geared at the worship of some particular deity or god.

Now, why do I tell you that story? It's because I want you to consider the context of what YHWH is saying to Moses in this text. Here is somebody who grew up in the royal family of Egypt, in Pharaoh's household, and he journeyed with and led an entire nation of people, who for 400 years only ever known life in the shadow of Egypt's culture and all of their many gods. A quick search suggests ancient Egypt worshiped and acknowledged about 2,000 different gods in their pantheon of deities.

Sure enough, all Moses had to do was leave the people for a brief moment. What did the people do? They ran right back to what they knew! They took their jewelry, melted it down, and crafted a golden calf to worship. Even though YHWH God just got them out of Egypt and flexed all over Egypt's gods while he did it, this was still a nation of people who had grown up with a singular calling and desire to please all the gods, lest they face their anger and wrath.

Some of you may remember the name Rob Bell from a couple of decades ago; he's fallen out of favor with the masses in recent years, but my first exposure to him was something of a one-man show. It was a long 90-minute sermon deep-dive into ancient people, ancient Israel, and culture called "The Gods Aren't Angry."

In this presentation, he journeys back in time to imagine these early civilizations and peoples who learned and were taught that if you wanted life to go well for you, it was required for you to do a delicate balancing act to keep these forces appeased.

In seasons of feast, you would bring a portion of the crop, and instead of eating it, using it, or storing it, you would offer it to these gods, and in so doing, the gods would see that you were grateful and would know that you understood where it all came from. But then you would have to offer even more the next year.

And in seasons of famine, seasons of drought, when the crop was small, what would you conclude? Well, obviously, they had done something to anger the

gods. So, in order to make amends and make it right, what would you do? Well, you'd offer more.

But let's say your circumstances don't change; it still hasn't rained; what would you conclude? It's clear that the gods are still angry, so in order to make amends and make it right, what would you do? Well, you'd offer even more. And you can begin to imagine how this cycle could go on and on and on sometimes until you don't have anything more to give.

So then, what do you do? Well, it depends on the culture and the god, but the sky was the limit, and much of it included some form of self-harm. "I have nothing else to give, so dear deity, look at me and what I've done to myself. Can't you see how serious I am, how sorry I am?"

Moses and the Israelites grew up in and only ever lived in a world where every famine, every storm, every infestation, every lightning strike, every wildfire, every flood, every disease, every plague, and every calamity was a reminder that the gods are angry, vengeful, and punitive. This is all they knew. Yet here in the midst of Israel's failure, Israel's shortcoming, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, proclaims his name and describes his character:

The Compassionate and Gracious God. A God Merciful and Gracious. A God of Mercy and Grace. Who is God? He is YHWH, the compassionate and gracious God. That is who he is.

Last week, Kevin brought us briefly into an adjacent story about Moses and God. It was their first encounter ever at the burning bush in Exodus 3, and there, as God meets with Moses for the first time, he identifies himself as the God of the patriarchs, the God of Moses' ancestors. He tells Moses something compassionate and gracious:

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt. Exodus 3:7-10

I want you to imagine for a moment that you are Moses, you are at the burning bush, and God just said something like this to you. How do you think you would respond? I don't know how I would respond, but I do know how I'd want to respond! I'd want to feel empowered. I'd want to celebrate and rejoice. I'd want to feel like Michael Jordan or LeBron James just offered to be on my team in a 2-on-2 basketball tournament. I'd want to feel like the Incredible Hulk just offered me a lifetime of personal protection. That's how I'd want to feel. But I suspect my reaction would be something more like Moses'. "Who am I?"

Have you ever been there? Have you ever landed that promotion, that new job, that spouse that's way out of your league? Have you ever had Imposter Syndrome? That's what Moses was experiencing right here, but his question is a poignant one, and I think it's worth asking about Moses' encounter with God back in Exodus 34.

Who am I? Who am I to this YHWH God that he would be compassionate and gracious to me? What makes me worthy of such compassion and grace? Let's dig in.

The word compassion is an interesting word. On the surface, it's a word that means just that: sympathy, compassion, [insert synonym here]. But much like English, Hebrew is a language comprised of words within words, or root words as we often call them, and when you look at the root of this compassion word in Hebrew, an interesting picture begins to develop, which John Mark Comer discusses in his book *God Has a Name*.

The root word of compassion is something like womb. In other words, when God describes himself as a compassionate God, he is very intentionally using parental language, maternal language, and motherly language, which may be surprising to you if you are only ever used to thinking of God in masculine terms.

A great example of this is in 1 Kings 3. How many of you remember the famous story of King Solomon's wisdom where two women came to the king disputing who the real mother of an infant was? There is this unexpected scene when the wise king suggests something ridiculous to split the baby in two. I don't think I need to tell you that this doesn't work well for either mom, and it especially doesn't work well for the baby. But what it did was reveal who the real mother was because the king believed that the real mother would rather give up their claim to her child than to see the child harmed.

"The woman whose son was alive was deeply moved out of love for her son and said to the king, 'Please, my lord, give her the living baby!'" (1 Kings 3:26a). That phrase, "deeply moved out of love" is this womb language, this compassion language. And that is the kind of language God is using here to describe himself. It's language that reveals how God feels about his people, about humanity, about his image-bearers, you and me, and the person sitting next to you. He feels for us as a mother feels about the infant in her womb.

By contrast, the word gracious is a different kind of word. It's a word not so much rooted in feeling but in action. I love the way one Hebrew Lexicon described this word: "only used as an attribute of God, as hearing the cry of the vexed debtor."

In other words, if you have ever been so hopelessly in debt that there is no way out and then someone were to act on your behalf, to intercede, intervene, and pardon you, free you, then and only then can you begin to grasp the depth and power of this word and more clearly understand exactly who God is.

He is a gracious God, a pardoning kind of God, a God who not only feels for us as a mother feels for the infant from her womb, but a God who stops at nothing to rescue us from hopeless and vexed debt. The closest analogy I can envision is that of a slave, and as God already showed his people in Egypt, God is a God who frees slaves.

In Luke 15, Jesus is very much in the throes of his ministry, and he is traveling from house to house, public place to public place, speaking to individuals and speaking to crowds. At one point, the text says that there was a whole crowd of people gathered around him, except this crowd was comprised of very specific people. Remember that debt language from just a moment ago? The text says these were "tax collectors and sinners." In other words, debt collectors.

They're listening to Jesus teach when some Pharisees and teachers of the law approach with a critique: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." It's a dig, a slight, a put-down because, in their minds, Jesus is talking to people he ought not to be talking to. No rabbi, no holy person, no man of God would ever engage with these degenerates. That's their mindset. So Jesus does what Jesus often does: tell a series of stories in response.

He tells a story about a man who had 100 sheep and lost one, so he left the 99 to find and rescue the one sheep and then rejoiced with all his loved ones when

he found it. He tells a story about a woman who had ten silver coins and lost one, so she dropped everything and searched carefully until she found it, and then rejoiced with all her loved ones. Just in case that sounds silly to you, imagine if ten percent of your bank account or ten percent of your portfolio disappeared. What lengths would you search and celebrate when you recovered it?

I can relate to these stories a bit. If you have ever seen the movie *Marley and Me*, then you know something critical about our life as a family. In 2005, my wife Tiffany and I got married, and exactly one week later, a little black labrador came into the world who would eventually, in a couple of months, become ours. We named him Zito (like Barry Zito for you baseball fans out there), and we chose him from the litter because the breeder encouraged us to choose the one who rolled over for us and submitted.

So here we were, this newlywed couple with our first addition to the family, and a couple of months later, he climbed in the car with us as we set out for our first big adventure, moving to Oklahoma City for me to finish my degree in ministry. To put it mildly, Zito was a wild child, a complete train wreck of joy and excitement and doofiness, but man, oh man, did we love him.

The next year, we welcomed our first child, our daughter Peyton, into the world, and Zito would lay with her, watch over her, and protect her no matter what. Zito was still crazy and wild, but around Peyton, Zito was as stoic and wise as a dog could be.

As the years went on, we moved back to California, to Chico, began work in ministry, welcomed our next family addition, our son Andrew, and there Zito was, just as wild, and yet just as stoic and wise when he needed to be as you could ever dream.

In 2012, our family was called to a new church in Redwood City, and all five of us moved. We did what many of you did when you moved to the Peninsula; we downsized. We went from a house with a yard to a duplex without a yard.

There is a park in Redwood City right next door to the YMCA on Hudson, and my mom took the kids there to play. While they were there, somehow or in some way, Zito nudged the screen door open and ran off into the wild blue yonder without his collar and tags on, and he wasn't microchipped. We were devastated. We had just arrived here and had no real support network and no familiarity with the neighborhood, the

facilities, or the services in the area. All we could do in that season was to search, worry, and pray, but no amount of effort paid off for us.

This went on for two long, grueling days. But somewhere along the way, I posted on one of the Craigslist forums that we'd lost our dog and gave a picture of what he looked like. I knew it was a waste of time, but it was all we could do until a woman emailed me and said, "I was just at the Peninsula Humane Society in Millbrae, and there was a black lab there that looked quite a bit like that; you might check there."

What are the odds? Black Lab? This is like the most common dog in the world. There is no way this is our dog. And how would he have gotten to Millbrae? It didn't make sense, but we had to go. And I will never forget that feeling as we walked those aisles of cages and came across that black lab. We saw that lonely, scared boy of ours recognize us and light up with excitement. It was our Zito!

Somehow, by the grace of God and a kind Samaritan, we'd found the needle in a haystack! To say that we rejoiced and celebrated is an understatement. Zito was lost, but now he was found!

So I'm guessing if you know the gospels very well at all or have your Bible open to Luke 15, you know where I'm going with this. Jesus tells one more story, one more parable, to help these critics, these Pharisees, and these teachers of the Law understand who God is and who Jesus is. To borrow from that paternal/maternal language from earlier, he tells a story about a father and his sons.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against

you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants [slaves].’ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. Luke 15:11–32

There’s a lot more to this story than we have time to unpack, but the portion I just shared with you is where we need to be and focus right now. The questions we are asking today are simple but profound: Who is God? Who am I? This parable of the prodigal son is the perfect answer to both of these questions because no matter who we are and no matter how we’ve lived our lives, we all have this prodigal son in us.

Whether you are a corporate CEO with an Ivy League education or you are hopelessly addicted to something in your life right now, the reality is that every single one of us has left home and tried to live our own way, as king of our own lives. Because that’s what sin is. There’s a famous quote that says, “In every sin, we are saying to God, ‘Not Your will but mine be done.’” And the reality is that we have all lived in exactly this way.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church and reminded them:

Romans 3

“There is no one righteous, not even one;” (v. 10).

Romans 3

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23).

Romans 6

“For the wages of sin is death...” (v. 23).

That is the sin condition that ensnares us all. It’s a stark reminder, to borrow words from Jesus’ parable, that “I am no longer worthy to be called your son [or daughter].” And yet, the compassionate and gracious God, the One who loves us as a mother loves the infant in her womb, the One who pardons the vexed debtor who is hopelessly indebted, hopelessly enslaved, not only opens the door to let us come home,

he is the kind of God who sees us in the distance, gathers his robe in his hands and runs to us, throws his arms around us, kisses us and says: “Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this [child] of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

This is redemption language. This is resurrection language. Is there anything the son did to be worthy of his father’s compassion and grace? Not a single thing! And yet, for the father, this was worth celebrating; this was worth everything! If YHWH, YHWH helps answer the first question: Who is God? The compassionate and gracious God should answer the second: Who am I? I am unworthy but worth everything! Say that with me: I am unworthy but worth everything!

What I learned with Zito is true a million times over of my kids. There is nothing I won’t do, no lengths I won’t go to, no valley too dark, no mountain too high, no situation too dicey, no pain I won’t endure to protect and pursue my kids until there is no more breath in my lungs. If you’re a parent, I think you understand what I’m saying.

My wife used a quote this last week that I’d never heard before, but it absolutely wrecked me because it’s one of the truest things I’ve ever heard. I thought it was original to her, but apparently, a woman named Elisabeth Stone wrote it: “Making the decision to have a child is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” And so you ask yourself: Are they worthy? That’s not even close to the right question. I don’t care if they deserve it; to me, they’re worth everything! That’s how much I love them.

Then realize this: God loves you more than that. Are you worthy? That’s not even the right question. Go back and look at the parable. The dad doesn’t even acknowledge the son’s contrition. Instead, he embraced the son and said, “Let’s throw a party. My child was lost, dead, and gone, and now they are found!”

Who am I? Who are you? I am unworthy but worth everything! I don’t know about you, but sometimes I forget just how much God loves me. Without thinking about it, I think about Jesus on the cross and how he died for us all in corporate terms. It almost seems like a good return on investment—God gives one and, in so doing, saves all. But then I ask myself if every other human being on the face of the planet throughout all of the time actually did manage to live this perfect, sinless life, and I was the only sinner, what would Jesus have done then?

Then I remembered that he would have done exactly the same thing! He would have gone through it all just for me. He would have gone through it all just for you. Do you know that? Do you believe that? I hardly know any of your life stories yet. I don't know what you've done or where you've been. But if I know people as well as I think I do, there's a whole bunch of us here in this room who aren't sure we should even be here.

Because you know your life, you know your secrets, you know your thoughts, you know all the ways that you think you fall short. You sit down to try to pray, but you convince yourself you aren't worthy. You sit down to read, but you convince yourself you aren't worthy. You try to get up and go to church, but you convince yourself you aren't worthy. You want to check out a community group, Men's Fraternity, Higher Power, Women's Bible Study, MomCo, but somewhere in there is the voice of the Accuser:

"Are you sure you're worthy? Are you sure you're good enough?" You've heard that voice before. We all have. Let me tell you right now: that's not the voice to listen to because the compassionate and gracious God says we are worth everything.

I am unworthy but worth everything! You are unworthy but worth everything! I pray you would know this and believe it because you are unworthy but worth everything.