

MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH



Exodus 3:7 "Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . I have ~~also~~ seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'"

In last Sunday's sermon, we reviewed the Old Testament story of Moses being saved as a baby in a basket hidden in the reeds on the bank of the River Nile until he was found by the Pharaoh's, and we discovered that despite what we remember from Sunday

School, this was less an accidental happening and more the shrewd planning by his mother and sister. In this week's Old Testament story, Moses is suddenly keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. So how did he get there after growing up in the Pharaoh's house? So, as we heard last week, one day after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. And Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. Moses then looked this way and that, and seeing that no one was watching, Moses killed the Egyptian and then hid his body in the sand. And when Pharaoh heard of Moses' killing of an Egyptian, the Pharaoh sought to have Moses killed. And so Moses fled from the Pharaoh; Moses fled from Egypt, fled for his good life and settled in the land of the Midianites, where he married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian.

So in this week's Old Testament Reading, Moses suddenly looks up from his sheep herding out beyond the wilderness and sees a bush that is burning on Mount Horeb, but which is not consumed, and he goes to investigate. Now we ALL know this story from Sunday School as well, where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and declares that God has observed the misery of God's people who are in Egypt; God has heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, God knows their sufferings, and God intends to bring them up out of that land, to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, because God intends to send

Moses to Pharaoh to demand that Pharaoh 'let my people go.' So we all know what happens next, right? We've all seen the movie. In the next screen, Moses, the hero, confronts the Pharaoh and demands that he "let my people go," right?

Well, not exactly. For while Moses is so often seen as the fearless disciple of God, the great confronter of Pharaoh, a mighty hero like Charlton Heston, Moses was, in fact, unwilling to return to Egypt and to save his people. Moses was someone yet unconvinced by God to revisit Egypt and plead for his people. For the voice from the burning bush alone was not enough to convince Moses that he should go back and free his people. We tend to forget his side of the story, how he fled for his life from Egypt, how he was a wanted man in Egypt, how Pharaoh had sought to kill Moses for his slaying of an Egyptian.

So how did Moses respond to God's idea that he Moses would go back and demand that the Pharaoh let my people go? Well, first Moses asked God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God replied, not to worry Moses, I will be with you. But Moses persisted, saying to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they (will) ask me, 'What is his name?' and what shall I say to them?" And so in today's Reading, God reveals his sacred name to Moses, that God is called Yahweh, meaning "I am

who I am". And that revelation is the usual focus of today's reading, missing the reluctance on Moses' part to go back.

Because despite this great revelation of God's holy name, Moses remained still unconvinced, if you read on. The story goes on in chapter 3 of Exodus with God saying to Moses, look, okay, go back and gather the elders of the Hebrews and tell them that I have heard their plea and have come to rescue them. God reassured Moses that the elders of the Hebrews will listen to him, even if he thinks the Pharaoh won't. So then take all the elders with you, Moses, God says, and go and confront the Pharaoh together. You don't have to go alone, God seems to be saying. Take all the elders with you. They will listen to you. This is not the way Hollywood usually portrays the singular confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, Moses is not usually pictured backed up by all the elders of the Hebrews.

Moreover, God tells Moses to ask the Pharaoh at first, not to 'let my people go' as so famously thought, Moses is not to ask the Pharaoh to let God's people be freed from their slavery and from their forced labor, but instead to ask Pharaoh for a long holiday, a Labor Day weekend of sorts. God tells Moses to go with the elders of Israel to the Pharaoh, and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; (and so Pharaoh) let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' The elders of the Hebrews are instructed not

to ask to be set free, but only for time off, for a religious holiday, so that they can simply go and make a sacrifice to their God. There is a strong suggestion here to Pharaoh that they would be returning afterwards. Then God says to Moses that God knows that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that the Pharaoh will let you go. I will bring this people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor's house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians (when you go)." What? Did the Hebrews take the jewelry of the Egyptians with them when they fled? Did they suggest they were only going for a three day journey to sacrifice to their God? That might explain why the Pharaoh sent his troops after them later.

But even so Moses is not convinced, and answered God, "But suppose (the elders of the Israelites) do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" What do I do then, asks Moses. So the Lord God had to woo Moses a bit more to take up this call. First God instructed Moses to throw down his staff, which turned into a snake, then Moses was instructed to pick up the snake, which turned back into a staff. This is all

happening up on Mt. Horeb. But that was not enough to convince Moses. So then the Lord God instructed Moses to put his hand inside his cloak and when he took it out it was leprous, as white as snow. Then the Lord God instructed Moses to put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out this time, it was restored. God was having to perform miracles in order to convince Moses to do the thing that God had commanded him to do. And even so, Moses was reluctant. "(For then) Moses said to the LORD, 'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; (for) I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.'" Then (finally) the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and God said, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; ----- even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; Aaron shall serve as a spokesman for you, and you shall serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs." And so, finally, Moses was persuaded, or at least ran out of excuses, and he went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, "Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." And so at last, Moses heads back to Egypt,

having spoken with the Lord God himself in the burning bush, where God revealed his holy Name, and having been given instructions and powers to plead with the Pharaoh for God's people, with Aaron as his spokesperson, Moses heads home. And that, is where the story continues next week. Amen.