

A FAITH ON THE GO!
2) Moses: “Let My People Go!”

Exodus 3: 1-15

Rev. Ron Dunn

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If you were with us last week, you will remember that we began a three part sermon series, entitled, “A Faith on the Go!” My premise in these three messages is that the same God who called Abraham and Moses to step out in faith and to act in love and compassion is the same God who calls you and me to do the same. Last week, we considered God’s call to Abram who became Abraham. You will remember that God said, “Go!” and Abraham was on his way, packing him and heading out into a new land and a new life that God had set before him. What was remarkable, of course, was that Abraham did not flinch, did not hesitate and did not protest. Even though he was “up there in years,” he, nevertheless, stepped out in faith and trust. A pretty impressive witness, I must say.

This morning, our focus shifts to the calling of Moses in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus and one cannot help but note that when it comes to ready agreement and obedience to God’s call, Moses is no Abraham! If there is a **calm acceptance** in the response of Abraham, there is an **anxious reluctance** in that of Moses.

In fact, if you know the story of Moses, you will readily recognize that there was little that was settled or serene in his topsy-turvy life. Hidden, as a baby, by his mother in the bull rushes in order to avoid the threat of the Pharaoh, Moses was discovered by the daughter of the Pharaoh and adopted into the royal court—even though he was a Hebrew child and of the same race that Pharaoh was determined to exterminate.

Even though Moses had enjoyed a privileged upbringing, he did not forget who he was or who his people were. As a young man, he noticed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man. His anger got the best of him and he promptly interceded and killed the Egyptian, burying his body in the sand. Moses knew that his life was now in jeopardy and decided to flee before his deed was discovered. He ended up out in the wilderness near Midian. It was there that he tried to establish a new life. He married and became a shepherd, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro.

Now, to be sure, this was hardly the life Moses had been groomed for and hardly the life that he had expected. By his own admission, he was an “alien residing in a foreign land.” Tending sheep in some desert outpost was not exactly what he had in mind for his life’s work. Nor, for that matter was it what God had in mind. The Exodus narrative tells us that during this time, the Israelites whom Moses had left behind, “groaned under their slavery and cried out.” God heard their cry and remembered the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This brings us to the passage that was shared as a part of our scripture lesson this morning—the story of Moses’ calling at the burning bush.

It was, in Moses' mind, just another day...another "watch the sheep...water the sheep...watch them eat" kind of day. But on his commute to work, he noticed something that he could not ignore...something on fire! A bush, as it turned out, but no ordinary bush! This bush was on fire, but it was not burning up! It just burned with white hot intensity.

As Moses stared with a combination of curiosity and wonder at the flames, he heard something, felt something, and knew something. And what he knew was that he was standing in the presence of the Holy. The feeling that came over him moved him to take his sandals off in recognition that this was indeed, holy ground. Moses understood that he was standing in the presence of the God of his ancestors—of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and that this God has heard the cry of his people who were living in bondage in Egypt—slaves to the Pharaoh and his people.

He also understood that this God was asking him to go to the Pharaoh and petition him to let the people of Israel go free. This, of course, was no small request—especially considering Moses' past and the fact that he was likely a "person of interest" in the criminal files of the Egyptian police.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Moses' first response was offered in the form of a protest: **"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"**

It was, of course, a fair question and an understandable response. But God was prepared with an answer. **"I will be with you,"** God said, **"And as proof, I want you to remember this...When you have brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this Holy mountain."**

The issue, in Moses' mind, however, was far from resolved. In fact, Moses proceeds to raise four more reasons for rejecting God's offer.

By this point, God's patience has run out and in anger, God tells Moses that his brother, Aaron has the gift of eloquent speech and it will be Aaron who will serve as Moses' mouthpiece to the people of Israel.

Well, Moses knew when he was overmatched and I imagine that it was with a "sigh too deep for words" that he finally said, **"Alright, I'll do it. I will go to the Pharaoh and I will, in your name, demand that he let my people go."**

And the rest is history—the history of one of the greatest stories of liberation and freedom that our world has ever known. Indeed, as Marcus Borg has suggested, the story of Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt is one of the great "macro themes" of scripture, a theme is reinforced again and again in the stories and the teaching points that are found throughout both the Old and the New Testaments.

I don't know about you, but I am struck by the difference between Moses and Abraham in their response to the pressing call of God in their lives. If anything, Abraham's response seems too easy and perhaps, for that reason, too unrealistic. God said, "Go!" and Abraham went. No questions asked. No concerns raised. No protests filed.

But God said, “Go!” to Moses and what ensued was nothing but questions, concerns and protests. The bottom line, of course, is that he didn’t want to go and was not timid about digging in and resisting God’s call.

Given these two examples of response from Abraham and Moses, I’m guessing that Moses’ response is the one with which many, if not most, of us can most easily identify. Am I accurate in making that suggestion?

Moses strikes me as being far more human in his response than Abraham. Who among us, if called by God, would not offer at least some form of “pushback,” some reason why it wouldn’t be such a good idea? My guess is that most of us would be inclined to do exactly what Moses did. And perhaps, some of us have actually done so.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing. It is, I think, a human thing and a somewhat natural and normal thing. To be called by God can be and often is an intimidating and life changing experience—not necessarily something that we would volunteer for on our own. The important thing and indeed, the impressive thing is that Moses was ultimately open to facing his fear and his mistrust. He was ultimately open to the hope and the vision that God was seeking to place in his heart. Eventually, Moses said, “Yes!” and that was all God needed to begin the liberating work that God had in mind.

So often, we imagine that those whom God calls into service are those that have no room for doubt and or disagreement within them. We assume that God calls only those who demonstrate great faith and eloquence, only those whose lives are lived on an even keel without any upheaval or disturbance that would make them unsuitable candidates for the work that God intends.

Yet, the calling of Moses would remind us that this simply isn’t so! Moses’ life was anything but together. Running from his past, wanted for murder, tending sheep in the wilderness...feeling lost and alone in foreign land, Moses was hardly a likely candidate for God to select for the purpose of confronting Pharaoh...or was he?

Clearly, God saw something in Moses! Something that suggested that Moses had the same passion that God had—a passion for the rights and the dignity of those who were enslaved, those who lived in agonizing bondage in the Egyptian system of oppression. It’s true that his passion had raged out of control when he killed the Egyptian oppressor who was abusing his Hebrew brother, but that sense of compassion and justice, I tend to believe, was exactly what God was looking for.

God had seen the misery of the people of Israel and Moses had seen and felt it too. That, I think, was enough, in God’s eyes, to qualify Moses as a candidate to lead the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. To be sure, he was rough around the edges. He had confidence issues. He didn’t speak very well and he had spotty past. If Moses had been interviewing for a job, he wouldn’t have made the final cut. But Moses had something that wouldn’t necessarily show up on a resume. Moses had a heart for his enslaved people... a heart for justice...a heart for liberation...a heart that was open to the God who had observed

the misery of the people...the God who had heard the cry of the oppressed...the God who spoke to him out of bush that on fire but not consumed.

It was, then, the heart of Moses that qualified him for his calling to lead God's people out of slavery. More than anything else, that is what God looks for when God calls human beings to the work of making this world a better place, a more just place, a more loving place. God looks for those who have receptive hearts to the needs, the hurts and the hopes of others.

So it is that I would like to ask about your heart, this morning.

- In what ways do you feel the pain of others?
- In what ways are you outraged over injustice and inequity?
- In what ways does your heart break over the things that break the heart of God?

It was Frederick Buechner who described one's vocation as that place "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Where is that place in your life? If you can put your finger on it, you have all the direction you need. The next step is to simply summon the courage to step out and act, trusting that God will lead the way.

That is, of course, what Moses did. He didn't have all the answers in front of him. He didn't have all of the specific details accounted for. There were a lot of loose ends and unanswered questions. But he did have God's promise that God would be with him every step of the way and for Moses, that was enough...enough to get him started on the path that would, eventually, lead his enslaved people to freedom and the Promised Land.

Faith, you see, isn't contingent upon having all the answers or knowing all of the details. It is contingent, first of all, upon our willingness to listen for the call of God in our lives—a call that is intended, I believe, for each one of us. Secondly, it is contingent not only upon listening for God's call, but also, learning to trust that the God who calls us into love and service is the God who promises to walk with us on the journey that stretches before us, no matter how difficult or challenging it might be.

It is then, a matter of listening...a matter of learning and eventually, a matter of living into that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. For your sake and for the sake of our world, I hope and pray that you find it. Amen!