



Moses v. Foliage

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 30, 2020*

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph was no longer able to hold back his feelings in front of his attendants, and he cried out to them, “Leave me!” So no one was present when Joseph made himself known to his brothers—but he wept so loudly that all of his Egyptian attendants heard him, and the news of it reached the Pharaoh’s palace. Joseph said to his brothers, “It is I—Joseph! Is my father really still alive?” The brothers could not answer, so dumbfounded were they.

Then Joseph said to the brothers, “Come closer to me.” When they had come closer he said to them, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! Please don’t rebuke yourselves for having sold me here. God sent me here ahead of you so that I could save your lives. There has been famine in the land for two years, and for the next five years there will be no tilling and no harvesting. But God sent me ahead of you to guarantee that you will have descendants on earth and to keep you alive as a great body of survivors.

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God! God has made me Pharaoh’s chief counselor, the head of his household and governor of all Egypt. Hurry back to our father and give him this message from Joseph: ‘God has made me governor of all of Egypt. Come to me here at once! Do not delay. You will live here near me in the territory of Goshen, you, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all your possessions. I will provide for you here—for the next five years will be years of famine—so that you and your children and all that you own will be spared from destitution.’

“You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother, Benjamin, that it is I who speak to you. Report to our father about how I am honored here in Egypt, and about everything you have seen. Go quickly, now, and bring my father to me!” Joseph threw his arms around Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him and wept too. Then he kissed his other brothers, weeping over them as well, and then he and his brothers talked.

Psalm 133

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| 1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is, *
when kindred live together in unity! | 4 It is like the dew of Hermon *
that falls upon the hills of Zion. |
| 2 It is like fine oil upon the head *
that runs down upon the beard, | 5 For there has God ordained the blessing: *
life for evermore. |
| 3 Upon the beard of Aaron, *
and runs down upon the collar of his robe. | |

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected the chosen people? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, descended from Sarah and Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected the chosen people, who were foreknown long ago.

For God’s gift and call are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God and now have received mercy through Israel’s disobedience, now they have become disobedient—since God wished to show you mercy—that they too may receive mercy. God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience in order to have mercy on everyone.

Matthew 15:10-28

Jesus called the crowd together and said to them, “Hear this and understand: it’s not what enters your mouth that defiles you—it’s what comes out of your mouth that defiles you.” Then the disciples approached him and said, “Do you realize that the Pharisees were offended by what you said?” Jesus replied, “Every plant that my Abba God in heaven has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Ignore them—they are blind people leading other blind people. And when the blind lead the blind, they all will fall into a ditch.”

Then Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Jesus replied, “Do you still not understand? Don’t you realize that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and eventually finds its way into the sewer and is gone? But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. This is what makes a person ‘unclean.’ For from the heart come all sorts of evil intentions—murder, sexual infidelity, promiscuity, stealing, lying, even foul language. These things make a person unclean—not eating with unwashed hands!”

Jesus left there and departed for the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, "Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed." Jesus gave her no word of response. The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, "Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us." Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." She then prostrated herself before him with the plea, "Help me, Rabbi!" He answered, "But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "True, Rabbi," she replied, "but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table." Jesus then said in reply, "Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass." At that very moment her daughter was healed.

This morning I want to do less of a sermon, and more of a chat about the passage we heard from Exodus—with Moses and the burning bush. In Judaism, there is a long tradition of midrash, essentially imagining around the edges of a story and filling in some of the details that the story does not contain. Granted, that has the capacity to go disastrously wrong, or to go in a hilarious direction (see Monty Python's *Life of Brian*), but, engaged with the heart of faith, it can be revelatory and inspirational. So I would like to do an exploration of the story with a bit of a midrash thrown in—hopefully inspired by God, and influenced by the musings of John Holbert.

This passage is one that I suspect many of us know. Pretty much everyone, even people who aren't churchy, have heard of Moses and the Burning Bush. Or have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston and his perfect response to the chatty shrub, falling to his knees in awe and wonder the second God's really deep voices thunders from the foliage and rapturously listening to the Holy Voice.

But if you look at the text itself, it seems to me to be not so much a story of a holy and mysterious encounter and more a story of farce. I mean, I am guessing that most of us, even people in the Bible, do not regularly see blazing bushes nor chat with foliage. Most of us would be stunned into silence or start looking around to see who was trolling us or quickly make an appointment with our therapist. But Moses engages in a lengthy chat with the shrub, seemingly as if that happens regularly.

Let's take a step back and look at what has led Moses to this point. He has just murdered an Egyptian overseer who was abusing an enslaved Israelite. Pharaoh was not pleased at all. So Moses is on the run, driven out into the wilderness to escape his Grandfather's anger. He ends up in Midian, a tiny tribal community in a desert on the east side of the Dead Sea. There he met his wife, Zipporah, and had a son named Gershom, which means Stranger or Sojourner—perhaps a divine suggestion that though Moses thinks he has found the place he will settle for the rest of his life, things might not work out that way. Settling into Midianite life, Moses becomes a shepherd, working for his father-in-law, Jethro. As the story goes on, Moses wanders out with his flock “beyond the wilderness” —which sounds like a really distant and scary place, far from everything he knows. And, wouldn't you know it, he ends up on Horeb (aka Sinai), the holy mountain of God. And it is on that holy mountain he encounters the famous burning bush.

As soon as they encounter each other, the bush gets chatty. It opens with, “Moses, Moses”. And, returning the leafy greeting with the appropriate Middle Eastern response, Moses answers, “here I am”. As you do when a bush begins a conversation. Perhaps thinking Moses is not looking impressed enough, the bush starts slinging orders: “Take off your sandals, you are standing on holy ground”. Moses obliges. Then the bush does the big reveal. I am not JUST a talking bush, I am the receptacle of YHWH—the God of your ancestors, the God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Rebekah and Isaac, and the God of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob.” Moses quickly gets with the program, and hides his face from fear of looking at God. So far, so good. This seems like a pretty appropriate response. But then things take a turn.

YHWH goes through a long explanation of why YHWH is appearing in this particular bush, at this particular time, to this particular person. “I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cries under those who oppress them; I have felt their sufferings. Now I have come down to rescue them from the hand of Egypt, out of their place of suffering, and bring them to a place that is wide and fertile, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Then YHWH goes on to list all the current occupants of this land to which they will go. Just to make sure Moses heard the Holy Voice, YHWH repeats, “The cry of the children of Israel has reached me, and I have watched how the Egyptians are oppressing them.”

Here I always imagine Moses lying flat in the dirt, listening to God, via the bush, go on about how God has heard the people and is going to act. Everything YHWH says is in the first person. I have seen. I have felt. I have heard. I have come down to rescue them. Moses is probably thinking, awesome. Thanks for giving me a heads up on your plans. I am super supportive of you YHWH. I'll even cheer you on.

But then suddenly the pronoun changes. YHWH says to Moses, OK, so I've done all this and I have a plan. Now, YOU, go. I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people out of Egypt.

And Moses, thinking, whoa, hang on a minute—I have definitely not signed up for this, quickly comes up with a barrage of questions, explanations for why God’s plan is not good.

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? I’m a fugitive from Egyptian justice. I have a wife and a child. I have sheep to take care of—I can’t just up and leave. YHWH calmly responds, I will be with you. And you will know that when you have brought the people out of Egypt and you shall worship me (God) on this mountain.

Perhaps YHWH thought this promise of a road trip with God at his side would get Moses to jump up and head to Egypt, but it didn’t. Moses had another argument to make “Hang on, if I come to the Israelites in Egypt and tell them you have sent me to them and they ask me what is this God’s name, what should I tell them”? Moses moves from “who am I”, to “who are you”. The bush fluffs out its branches and draws itself up to its full height and speaks in that deeply resonant James Earl Jones voice that bushes tend to have, and answers, “I AM AS I AM”, or “I AM WHO I AM”, or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE”, or “I AM WHAT I WILL BE”, or something or other. This notoriously ambiguous response is surely part of YHWH’s point. YHWH is not about to reveal the whole divine name and identity to anyone, let alone this argumentative, fugitive shepherd, who is doing everything he can to get out of cooperating with, answering, the call of his God.

If you read on, you will find that this answer really doesn’t satisfy Moses who seems to be thinking, yeah right. Tell them I AM sent me. That’ll work. So he begins to negotiate the addition of some fancy special effects with God. “They are not going to believe me”, Moses whines. OK fine, says God. I’ll throw in some rods that turn into snakes, cure a few leprosy hands, and turn some water into blood. Well, that’s a start, says Moses. But, you know, I am not really a very good public speaker—certainly not before today and even now that you have spoken to me. In other words, I have been a poor speaker and my skills haven’t improved during my chat with your blazing bush. Now, given Moses clear verbal parrying skills, this is simply not true. At no point in the whole Moses story does he seem at a loss for words. He is just thinking of one more ploy to get out of what God is asking. YHWH’s response is to get a little testy and to remind Moses just who gave humans speech and essentially tells Moses to just shut up for a minute. Apparently the same God who created all things cannot get Moses to be quiet, because Moses pushes ahead. Ummm Send someone else. Who knows whether God had this in mind all along or whether God was just tired of Moses’ whingeing, but YHWH says, OK, Aaron, your super eloquent brother can go along as your mouthpiece. But you are still my choice, despite your foolish, lame, excuses.

What a great story. An unforgettable story. And, as you know, I am always loathe to try to find a single “point” in any Biblical story. Stories, especially Biblical stories, do not have A point—they are stories—they have many facets. And because as readers and hearers we bring our own experiences to them, they have different points for each of us.

I do think though, that this marvelous, farcical story sets the pattern for all future divine calls. From Moses on, through Gideon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. God’s call is usually and regularly met with reluctance, lack of enthusiasm, or downright obstinance and refusal. God seems to have a long habit of calling people to speak truth to power, to say things most people are not at all interested in hearing. And prophets have a way of dying at the hands of those they have been called to speak to. So, no, Moses is no Charlton Heston with the perfect response to God. Moses is more like you and me. Often much less than eager to speak the truth. Often very happy to leave the work of truth telling to someone else. But sometimes, just like Moses, you and I find that the task is ours and only ours, and we, and only we, must be the agents of God.