

Moses: A Defining Moment
John 4:7-15 and Exodus 2:11-22
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

When we left Moses last week, he was an infant, given up for adoption by his mother in order to save his life. Pharaoh's daughter took him in, and he became part of the large royal family. Exodus tells us nothing more about his childhood or adolescence, but in the book of Acts, right before he is martyred, Stephen recounts God's faithful activity throughout the Hebrews' history mentioning that, "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds." (7:22)

Growing up in Pharaoh's household, Moses would have wanted for nothing. Along with the hundreds of other royal family members, he would have traveled up and down the Nile as part of his education and oversight of Egypt, from the modern-day city of Aswan in the south, to the pyramids at Giza and the city of Memphis, and on to the Mediterranean Sea. He would have studied science, math, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, religion, philosophy and law. And, he likely had some military experience. The Jewish historian Josephus gives an account of how by the time he was thirty, Moses led the Egyptian army to victory in a battle against the invading Ethiopians. But for all the luxury and advantages he enjoyed, Moses obviously did not forget his roots. It seems he knew he was adopted and realized that his own people were the Hebrews.

Perhaps it was that desire to know his family of origin that prompted Moses to leave the palace and meet his ancestral people. In quick succession Moses comes in contact with three different groups, and these encounters significantly shape his understanding of who he is and the course his life is about to take. First, Moses witnesses the suffering of his extended family, when he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave with fatal force. Moses immediately responds to this injustice by killing the Egyptian and hiding his body in the sand. The next day Moses goes out again and again witnesses an injustice occurring, this time between two Hebrews. As he had done the day before, Moses intervenes asking, "Why are you striking your neighbor?" to which the Hebrews respond by basically saying, "who do you think you are telling us what to do?" Though Moses is, indeed, an Israelite, he is not yet recognized as such by his brothers. The accuser has become the accused. And then, the clincher: his murder of the Egyptian is known. He has been outed which forces Moses to flee Egypt, landing him in Midian.

A Midian well is the occasion for his third defining encounter. Maybe as much as a month has elapsed since the encounters with the Egyptian and the two quarreling Hebrews. Moses has been on the move, getting as far away from the long arm of Pharaoh as possible. He approaches a well and sees a group of young women, sisters as it turns out, being harassed by some shepherds. The same compassion and indignation he had felt seeing the Hebrew slave beaten wells up within him. He comes to their aid, much as he had done in defense of his fellow Israelites.

In these three encounters, we learn some important things about Moses. He was angered by injustice and felt compelled to do something about it. He had compassion for those who were picked on, harassed, or oppressed, and he had the courage to act to protect those who were being mistreated. In today's vernacular, we'd say Moses was one to "stick up for the underdog." He's the one who confronts the bully, who innately grasps that someone has to take care of the weak because they can't take care of themselves. And, Moses is that guy.

Notice that Moses' sense of justice transcends boundaries of nationality, gender, and even family. He is not indifferent to evil regardless of who perpetrates it or who the victim is. We might say, Moses calls a spade a spade. Evil is evil. Abuse is abuse. Compare that to what is happening in our political system today, when both national parties fail to hold their members accountable, fail to call out abusive, hateful behavior, and fail to do the right thing just to prevent the other side from getting ahead or gaining a point in the polls.

Moses demonstrates a concern for life, especially the life of the weaker members of the society, and he has an intolerance for abuse exercised by the strong. It requires uncommon courage to risk one's life on behalf of those suffering injustice, and Moses has that kind of courage. Already we're getting an inkling of the kind of man and leader who can stand up to Pharaoh and not wilt.

Notice, also, that Moses' keen sense of justice has been learned, not from his Hebrew heritage, but during his Egyptian upbringing. Just as we saw last week with Pharaoh's daughter, this is a significant testimony to God's creative, life-giving activity on behalf of the whole world. What's at stake here is cosmic in nature. Moses will be fighting Pharaoh on behalf of his people, but God is fighting evil on behalf of the entire creation.

But, Moses is not ready for that fight just yet. Yes, he has a passion for justice, but killing a man is not the answer. It is the right motivation but the wrong

method and the wrong timing. It's his way, but it's not God's way. Rather than a righteous crusader, his initial actions are those of a privileged and protected individual who suddenly realizes how the other half lives. He is a raw and untried champion of civil rights. He tackles the oppression of his newly discovered people head on, by violent action, by taking the law into his own hands. Moses begins his career as a failed political agitator, his bravado turned to fear at the first sign of opposition. This very human, if not criminal, individual has much to learn before he is made fit to become God's agent of liberation. In his encounter with the Egyptian, Moses acts and fails, then retreats and runs. Yet at the time of retreat, he is ready to learn the truth, ready for a revelation from God. Later he will return and begin the liberation struggle again, only then he'll do it God's way.

Within a month or so, Moses has gone from being a prince in Egypt to a fugitive from the law, and finally to a married nomadic shepherd living among the Midianites. After Moses rescued the sisters at the well, the young women returned home with the sheep, probably earlier than expected because Moses had helped them. They told their father how "an Egyptian man rescued us from a bunch of shepherds and even helped us draw water for our flock to drink."

Their father, here called Reuel but also known as Jethro, wonders, "Where is he? Why did you leave him all alone at the well? Go invite him to eat dinner with us!" Moses accepts the invitation and before too long Moses has both a wife and a son and has settled in with his new family, tending his father-in-law's sheep.

Shepherds were considered by the Egyptians to be among the lowest class in society, and Moses, prince of Egypt would tend sheep for the next 40 years. I can't help but wonder, how often did Moses reflect on the life of luxury he had once lived? How many times did he think about the Israelite slaves and their oppression back in Egypt? His life had turned out so differently than he had hoped or dreamed as a young man. Moses had fallen about as far as it was possible to fall. How did he deal with that?

Moses' 40 years in the desert is in many ways a metaphor for events in our own lives. We all take a turn in the desert at some point or other, and as hard as it is, the desert is necessary for our growth and maturity. There are some lessons we need that we simply can't learn anywhere else.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness we are prone to offer one of three responses. The first is, "I don't need this!" My spouse may need it, my neighbor may need it, but I do not need it.

The second response is, “I’m tired of it.” I have to confess, I am the master of this response. No matter how long we have been in the wilderness, it seems too long. We feel weary, weary to death of this situation, this person, this circumstance. We feel trapped or resentful. We feel like we’re at the end of our rope. Moses, remember, was in the desert for 40 years.

The third response is the one that offers us the most hope and peace, and that is, “Here I am, Lord; what is it you want me to learn?”

God taught Moses some critically important lessons in the desert. For one thing, God taught Moses how to deal with the failures from his past, what to do with memories. As Moses ran off into the desert, his heart was heavy with fear and regret. Have you ever been really disappointed with yourself and your actions? Have you ever felt like a failure? Failure strips away all the bravado we use to cover up our hurts. It humbles us which allows us to know ourselves, and from there, to forgive ourselves. Moses will spend 40 years in the Midianite desert; then he’ll lead the children of Israel for 40 more years in the desert. Can you imagine what those decades with all the Hebrews would have been like if Moses had not learned to first forgive himself so he could forgive others?

Second, the school of the desert taught Moses how to wait on God. We need to be reminded that God is not limited by time so our timelines do not impress God. But, perhaps more importantly, we need to be reminded that the things God cares most about don’t happen quickly. During Moses’ 40 years in Egypt, he learned the Egyptian culture, language, philosophy and religion; he learned economics, construction, and leadership. But during the 40 years in the wilderness he learned things that were even more important: self-discipline, perseverance, humility, faith, character and how to listen for the voice of God. Without these qualities, Moses would never have been prepared to go up against Pharaoh and lead God’s people out of slavery.

Third, in the desert we learn that God never leaves us alone, even and especially in the wilderness. The desert is, by its very nature, desolate. It’s lonely. And it’s often monotonous. We can feel that God has either abandoned us or that God does not care. Neither is true. It is in these moments that we need to hold fast to the words of Deuteronomy 32:10: “God found you in a desert land...God found you in a howling wilderness. God encircled you. God instructed you. And kept you as the apple of his eye.” Friends, you are the apple of God’s eye, and never more so than when you are feeling lost and alone in the wilderness.

God didn't force Moses into the desert and that is usually true for us as well. We can find ourselves in the wilderness as a result of a bad economy, illness or loss, harmful decisions made by others or decisions we've made ourselves. Those things are seldom God's will or work. Nevertheless, God uses our seasons in the wilderness, if we will allow him to, to prepare and shape our hearts, minds and character for God's good and eternal kingdom purposes. God is not finished with us because we're in the wilderness. In fact, God is often most profoundly at work in us during the wilderness seasons of our lives. In the case of Moses, those four decades were preparing him for the most important part of his story. Can we trust that the same is true for us?