

Moses: Excuses, Excuses
Matthew 10:5-7, 19b-20 and Exodus 3:9-15, 4:10-17
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Have you ever carried on a debate with God? Maybe tried to change God's mind about something? Perhaps argued or attempted to bargain with God about some issue or circumstance in your life? It's a very human reaction, one we see in none other than the great Moses himself.

When we left Moses last week, he had unexpectedly encountered God while out driving his herds to food and water. At the time, he was 80 years old, and he hadn't been in Egypt in four decades. During that time, I think it's safe to assume that he had tried to bury deep within himself the empathy he once felt for the Hebrews. He needed to block from his mind the thoughts of what had happened and of what he had seen of the Israelites' suffering. But God knew that deep down, Moses still remembered and was still concerned for the people to whom he had been born. But, now, standing before the burning bush and hearing God tell him, "Get going. I'm sending you," Moses responded as most of us would—he started making excuses. He started playing the "Yes, but" game with God, and he said "Yes, but" no less than five times.

For Moses to respond in such a way tells us that Moses' struggle is real, revealing a lack of personal ambition but also a capacity for leadership. It shows that Moses can be bold and persevere in the face of powers greater than his own. God's responses reveal someone who takes Moses' concerns with utmost seriousness and with uncommon patience. There is true give and take in these interactions. Moses is not a puppet to God's divine will. The human partner has a genuine say in shaping the direction and even the outcome of events.

God takes the initiative, as God always does, inviting Moses to be part of the divine plan, and God sets the agenda, but there is no coercion. God wants Moses to be involved; in fact, God goes to great lengths to enlist Moses in this venture, because gifted human leadership is critical to the success of God's plans. But, Moses can say "no." God will not violate Moses' freedom.

When Moses first heard a voice calling his name out of a burning bush, his response had been, "Here am I." With Moses' first excuse, that initial readiness turns to reluctance once the task has been outlined. "Here am I" becomes, "Who

am I? I'm just a shepherd. I'm 80 years old. I've just gotten my pension check going into the direct deposit. I'm using my AARP discounts. I'm not ready for a whole new mission in life. These are my golden years—time to kick back and relax a little.” God replies in language that is simultaneously clear and enigmatic saying, “I will be with you, Moses.” God does not directly address Moses’ age or stage in life, but he does address Moses’ unspoken concern about competence. God promises to be with Moses in all he undertakes. He will not be left alone or left to his own resources. Moses’ “I” will be accompanied by God’s “I” which opens possibilities that Moses would never have on his own.

Moses didn’t stop with his first excuse. His “who am I?” now becomes “Who are you?” It’s not an accusatory question or one laden with suspicion or hostility. Moses knew that if he were to go to the Israelites’, there were bound to be questions, and given the prolific number of Egyptian deities, one of those questions might well be about which god had sent Moses. Understandably, Moses wanted to know how to identify the god that had appeared to him.

On the one hand, Moses’ question leads to new insight. His question elicits a fuller revelation of who God is, information Moses would not have had had he failed to ask for it. But, on the other hand, more knowledge did not actually satisfy Moses, just as it doesn’t satisfy us. The more one understands of God, the more mysterious God becomes. Knowing God’s name is never the critical issue. “I am who I am,” “I will be who I will be,” “I will be God with and for the people at all times and places”—however you translate it, ultimately, the real issue, when it comes to God, is still about trust. Yet, the giving of one’s name implies a certain kind of relationship. It opens up the possibility for intimacy and it also entails vulnerability. God is revealing the divine nature by sharing the divine name.

Unflappable in his desire for some kind of permanent deferment, Moses raises a third objection. “But suppose they don’t believe me or listen to me, but say, “The Lord did not appear to you.” (4:1) In other words, “Now I know what to say, but what if I go and say it and nobody listens or cares? What if they don’t come, don’t follow? What if my words make no difference at all?” It’s a question every preacher—and every parent—has asked.

In response, God gives Moses two signs. God instructs Moses to throw down his shepherd’s staff, and when he does so, God turns it into a snake. God tells Moses to pick up the snake, and it turns back into a staff. Next God asks Moses to put his hand inside his coat. When Moses pulls his hand out, it is covered with a terrible skin disease. When Moses puts it back in his coat and

withdraws it again, his hand is healed. These miracles were offered as proofs that Moses could show the Hebrews so they would believe him, and if these first two didn't work, Moses was to pour some water from the Nile on the ground, and God would turn the water to blood.

Yet even with the miraculous signs, Moses is not done with the "Yes, but's". His fourth excuse focuses on his own abilities, his own competence: "I've never been able to speak well, Lord. In fact, public speaking scares me to death. I mumble a lot. I can't think fast on my feet. And I don't always use good grammar." God's response to Moses' fear is to say, "Don't worry. I will be with your mouth." It's not unlike Jesus telling his disciples not to worry because the Holy Spirit would put the right words in their mouths at the right time.

The fifth "Yes, but" exasperates God whose patience seems to finally be wearing thin. "O my Lord, please just send somebody else," says Moses. Here is a last desperate plea to avoid this interruption in his life. "I've really got the hang of this sheep thing, now Lord. Retirement is good; those senior discounts at the movies are really nice. You don't seriously want me to go to Egypt, do you?" The truth of the matter was that Moses just didn't want to do what God was asking him to do. Moses' response reminds me very much of my daughter whose favorite phrase at age 3 was, "Don't want to!" After hearing that over and over, and in what was not one of my finer parenting moments, I blurted out one day, "So?" This fifth excuse elicits a "So?" from God.

At times, all of us feel like making excuses for failing to respond to God's call, for failing to do what we fear God is asking us to do. Imagine if God had responded to Moses' objections by saying, "No problem, Moses, I'll find someone else. You just keep tending Jethro's sheep there in the desert." Moses would have missed out on the most important moment of his life, the epic event for which his entire life had been preparing him. He would have missed being used by God to deliver a nation from slavery to freedom. He would have missed shaping and forming those people to be God's own people. He would have missed standing in God's presence, receiving the 10 Commandments. And, we wouldn't be talking about him 3300 years after the fact.

This lengthy exchange between God and Moses at the bush raises several critical theological truths. First, like Moses, every one of us is called, repeatedly, to be God's instruments of redemption and deliverance, help and hope. And, as with Moses, God does not call perfect people. By nature, we make excuses. We think we are well enough prepared, don't have enough information, aren't gifted

enough or imposing enough in our own right for people to take us seriously. We're afraid of failing, afraid of looking silly. We're sure the things we lack are obstacles God can't possibly overcome. So, we look for outs, which is easy enough to do because let's face it, God's call is often inconvenient or frightening.

Second, God's invitation to us does not negate our concerns. God invites us to show up, to bring all of who we are to the task being given us. But we need to also remember that as this conversation is taking place, Moses has no shoes on, for he is on holy ground, standing in the presence of Almighty God. Still, don't miss the fact that God adjusts the initial plan to take into account Moses' fears. God did not initially envision sending Moses to Pharaoh as part of a package deal, but God resorts to Plan B, sending Aaron along with Moses, to accommodate Moses' needs. We'll see in chapters 13-14 that Moses gradually works himself into the role that God intended for him all along, and Aaron drops from view, so Plan B turns out to be an interim measure, but a necessary one for God to achieve God's purposes.

Third, even though God goes to Plan B, God is not ultimately stymied by human intransigence. God will work with what is available, and to a point God will be self-limiting by which I mean, God chooses to work through human beings and the limitations we bring. But, if Moses had in the end, declined to work with God, God would have chosen someone else. The person who stood the most to lose was Moses.

God's call comes in many forms. On a daily basis God calls us to participate in God's work of encouraging, blessing, challenging, liberating, and healing the world. Most often it happens in small ways. It's in that nudge to send a card, take a meal or pick up the phone to check on how someone is doing. It's in that restlessness, that inability to sit by idly, watching human suffering continue unabated. So, you write your congressman or participate in a march, send money to disaster relief, donate household goods to help a refugee family resettle, or hold the hand of a person in hospice care. God's call is that sense that we can't do everything, but that's no excuse for doing nothing, so we tutor, mow the elderly neighbor's grass, mentor a teenager, or drive someone to a doctor's appointment.

The burning bush experiences of our lives are few and far between, if we have one at all, but we all have hundreds, if not thousands, of small experiences when, for a particular person, at a particular moment in time, we are God's instrument of support, help, mercy or blessing. We never outgrow God's call. In the life of faith, there is no retirement. Our invitation is to pay attention; to listen for the whisper of the Spirit, to watch for that person who is easy to overlook.

And, when God says, “Get going, I’m sending you!” we would do well to say, “I’ve heard you call. Lead me to where the hurt is. Help me to break the bonds of oppression. Give me courage to work for freedom. Here I am, Lord, send me.”