

Moses: Curiosity & Call
Romans 12:9-21 and Exodus 2:23-3:10
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Forty years have now passed since Moses fled Egypt and settled in Midian. He has long ago traded his home in the royal palace for a nomad's tent in the rugged Sinai, and he has two sons with his wife Zipporah. Moses spent most of each year living in tents and driving his flocks of sheep and goats to find what little vegetation grew in the desert. Parts of the Sinai receive as little as an inch and a quarter of rainfall annually. Other areas might receive 2 ½ - 6 inches. By comparison, in the Washington metro area, we get about 41 inches of rain each year. That perspective helps us better appreciate how skilled the nomadic herders had to be if their flocks were to survive. It is a skill that Moses learned and that would serve him well when it came time to lead God's flock, the Israelites, through the desert as well.

Not unlike his growing up years in Egypt, Exodus tells us almost nothing about this second forty-year period of Moses' life. In fact, the entire four decades is covered in just 12 verses. Then, at the end of chapter 2, the narrator lets us know that something is afoot, something is changing.

“A long time passed, and the Egyptian king died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.”

There is a lot packed into these three verses. Most notable is the change that occurs in the Hebrew people. For the first time, the people are crying out. This is a change on the part of the oppressed. They are now engaging in a public outcry and naming their oppression for the slavery it is. This makes a difference in the character of their situation. It also has an effect on God's possibilities within their situation.

The narrator now brings God into the heart of the story. Israel's cry is not, in and of itself, salvific, no matter how heartrending it may be. They are powerless to save themselves. If life is to be possible again, God will have to become involved. While God was mentioned back in chapter 1 and has by no means been absent in the events to this point, the divine activity has been behind the scenes,

unobtrusive. What God has been doing is knowledge that has not yet been available to the oppressed who are crying out. That knowledge will come first to Moses.

The four verbs used to speak of God mirror the actions of Pharaoh's daughter when she found Moses in the Nile, had compassion on him and took him in as her own son. The text tells us that in response to the Israelites' groaning, God heard, God remembered, God looked and God took notice—or more literally, God “knew” the Hebrews. Let's be clear about what these verbs are and are not saying about God. God hearing does not mean that God has suddenly developed more sensitive ears, as if God had not heard their cries before. Instead, it has the sense of taking heed of, of hearing with the intent to respond. Likewise, God remembering does not infer that God's memory needed jogging, as if God had forgotten promises that had been made. To remember is to be actively attentive to that which is remembered; it shows a divine sense of obligation to a prior commitment.

Similarly, to “see” in this context doesn't refer to eye contact. It means to begin to move toward someone with kindness or sympathy. And for God to know is not simply a matter of head knowledge, as if God has gained some new information or insight into what is happening. It is, instead, to so share in the experience of another that the other's experience can be called one's own. In this case, it indicates that God has entered into the oppression and suffering of his people. The logical question now becomes, what is God going to do about it?

On a day like any other, Moses sets out to look for food for his father-in-law's flock. For him, it is an ordinary, everyday journey with no religious intentions; just another mundane, monotonous day of tending sheep in the wilderness. Yet it is in this place, on a mountain in the desert, far removed from any temple or the sights and sounds of any religious community, that God chooses to make a divine revelation. It will not be the last time God appears to shepherds in a wilderness with an announcement of peace. It will not be the last time God chooses a nontraditional, nonreligious setting for a proclamation of the divine word.

On this very usual day, Moses notices something very unusual—a bush burning but not being consumed. He turns toward it, not frightened or repelled by the sight but drawn toward it. Moses isn't expecting an encounter with God when he moves toward the bush. He's simply curious, and God makes use of his human curiosity for divine purposes. Curiosity, in this case, leads to encounter and call.

Notice that it is not until God sees Moses actually moving to satisfy his curiosity that God calls to him; it is only as Moses allows himself to be drawn into the sphere of this unusual sight that communication takes place. While the word that God will speak is the focus of the theophany, or divine revelation, sight plays an important role in Moses' readiness to hear. There would have been no hearing if the sight had not been attended to. I think this has a lot to say to us whose lives are so busy and harried that we routinely rush past people and sights without ever noticing them, much less taking time to turn aside and really look. I wonder what encounters with God we miss because we are in such a hurry.

God calls Moses by name from the bush, then warns him not to come any closer. "Take off your sandals because you're standing on holy ground." Sandals carried dirt, and it was a sign of respect to remove them when entering a home or place of worship. Even though Moses is outside standing in the desert, removing his shoes acknowledges the truth that any place where God appears is holy and the appropriate response to an encounter with God is reverence and respect.

In various cultures the donning of hats, or the removing of them, is a sign of respect when in worship or prayer. In Jerusalem, Jews back away from the Western Wall after they pray, unwilling to turn their backs on this sacred place that represents God's house. Atop the Temple Mount, Muslims wash their feet and hands before entering the mosque, as an expression of reverence. Many Christians have lost this sense of reverence, respect and awe when we gather for worship. In our focus on friendship and intimacy with God, and our emphasis on the grace and acceptance of God, we sometimes forget that "our God is a consuming fire" and that he demanded of Moses the ancient Near East sign of respect, the removal of his shoes. Perhaps we would do well to consider what signs of respect we might show God today, in our own cultural context.

Moses is now afraid to look. He is afraid to look at God which indicates that there was a God to be seen. The voice he heard was not disembodied; the messenger of the Lord, in this case God himself, appeared and spoke. Moses knows that seeing God can mean death, so Moses hides his face, but not for long. For the next few chapters, Moses and God engage in what can only be called a face-to-face encounter. Moses removes his shoes as instructed, as a sign of respect. But, Moses is not intimidated. God's word to Moses draws Moses into a genuine conversation, a back-and-forth, animated dialogue.

The gist of this conversation is that God reveals how God is going to deal with the sufferings of his people: God is sending Moses to deliver them. The

emphasis throughout this holy calling is on God's divine initiative. It is God who confronts Moses and calls him to a task. Moses does not prepare for the encounter, nor does he seek it. Yet, God picks a known entity, a person with the gifts, the courage, the passion for justice, the leadership skills, and the lessons and maturity from the desert, to take on the kind of activity God has in mind. The gifts and experiences Moses brings to this moment are not negated. To the contrary, God's creative work in Moses' life to this point has shaped a human being with what is needed for the tasks ahead. While this specific encounter at this specific moment brings new insight and a changed direction for Moses' life, there is also a continuity with his past.

This encounter reveals some important things about both God and Moses. As we'll see even more clearly next week, Moses' personal struggle over what he is being asked to do is real, and God takes Moses' concerns seriously. God takes the initiative, but Moses plays an active role in shaping the events to come. Neither God nor Moses act alone to bring Israel out of Egypt. God didn't send an angel to deliver the Hebrews. He sent a person. God chooses to work with and through Moses to accomplish his purposes.

This is such an critical point that I want to make sure we get it. God's usual way of working in the world to alleviate suffering, to right injustice and to comfort people in their pain is not to intervene miraculously, suspending the laws of nature, violating the principle of human freedom, or sending angels to make things right. God works through people, people like you and me. God sees, hears, and knows peoples' suffering. God is depicted here as one who is intimately involved in the suffering of those who are oppressed, as one who has so entered their sufferings as to have deeply felt what they are having to endure. God has chosen not to remain safe and secure in some heavenly abode, untouched by the sorrows of the world, but to enter those sorrows. Of course, the fullest revelation of this God who is with us in our pain and struggles will come in the person of Jesus.

God is so deeply concerned and so fully invested in alleviating suffering that God expects *us* to see, hear and know the sufferings of others, and then to respond as instruments of God's merciful, redeeming action. We don't have to wait on a burning bush to know that we are called and sent to love hurting people in the name of Christ. In my experience, our calls come most often in a whisper or through a feeling, a nudge, a sense of disquiet or a compulsion to act that we can't shake. Often those nudges or prompts of the Spirit come when we're going about our normal, daily routine. We're more likely to be aware of those nudges, though, when we put ourselves in a place to hear God speak by reading and studying

scripture, by praying, serving others, and by worshiping regularly with a community of faith who hold us accountable to practice God's call to a selfless life, as Paul describes it to the Romans. All of these things prepare us to see and hear—and to respond to what we see and hear.

It is a gross misreading of Moses' story if we think God only calls "someone else." Or that we need some sort of emotional or flamboyant experience to validate that God has a job for us to do. God calls each of us. Do you know what God has called you to do? God wants to use and work through you.

Isn't it interesting that God has made a plan for delivering the Hebrews from slavery? He has picked his man. But, even God has to wait to hear how Moses will respond. Along with God, we'll see what Moses has to say next week.