

May 31, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: "Moses: What's Your Excuse?"

Exodus 3:1-10; Exodus 3:11-15; 4:1-5

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In our sermons through late spring and summer we are looking together at people in the Bible. We are looking together at our ancestors in the faith. The Bible is filled not only with good theology and not only with prayers, not only with songs, not only with history, but the Bible is filled with stories of people. People whose names and story have been preserved for us by God so that we can look at them and through them find the shape of our own our identities. The perfect person of course is Jesus, and our lives, our identity, is to be shaped by his life. But there are all kinds of other faithful people in the Scripture, and through their lives, not just their perfection but sometimes through their imperfection as well; our lives are to grow in faith and stature before God.

So this is our over-arching theme, and we come this morning to think about a person called Moses: Moses who lived somewhere around 1300 years before the birth of Jesus. Moses who is one of the greatest figures in the pages of Israel's ancient history. Moses is in the top three along with Abraham his ancestor who lived maybe 500 years before Moses (c.1800BC) and along with King David who lives 300 years after Moses (c. 1000BC). Moses who becomes a great and towering figure in the history of ancient Israel and in our history since that day.

MOSES IN ANCIENT AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY. He's famous first of all because he's a writer; because his name is attached to the first five books of the Old Testament, the first five books of the Bible. We sometimes call those books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) the Pentateuch, but sometimes we call them simply "The Books of Moses."

Some people say "Well he didn't write them all!" And, yes, we know though he didn't write them all because the last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, speaks about his death! It's clearly edited after he dies. The books we have in their present form come to us through a long process, but the process started somewhere, with someone, and that someone is Moses. He is certainly, for example, the one through whom the laws of ancient Israel come into being within that community, and have broad based impact in the world from that time to this time. We call the laws within the Books of Moses, quite simply "the Laws of Moses." They stand at the foundation of ancient Judaism. They stand at the foundation of modern Judaism and they are summarized quintessentially in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are referred to by our Lord Jesus

Christ, embraced by him and by the early church, and they are passed on to us as the epitome of the ethical and religious life to be lived out before the Living God.

This impact comes to you and me through Moses. He is a remarkable writer. He is a remarkable lawgiver, and he is also a remarkable leader – a freedom fighter who leads his people out of slavery and bondage in Egypt across the Red Sea through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. This event that we call the Exodus: Moses is the one who through 40 years holds his people together on their journey. To begin with they are slaves. They don't know how to live with each other. They have had no opportunity and carried no responsibility to make their own laws for life together. These former slaves know how to squabble with each other, and with Moses, and with God. And Moses is the one who holds them together, and moves them not only from slavery to the Promised Land, but from chaos to civilization, transforming them to become a people who live their lives under the law, seeing the law not as a symbol of oppression but as a gift of God's grace through which they find liberty in their relationships with each other.

So Moses in his own day was a towering figure. He's a writer. He's an inspirer. He's a lawgiver. He's a leader. He's a freedom fighter. But his impact of course goes on far beyond his own day, far beyond ancient history and weaves its way through history from that day to this. And weaves its way in particular into our own history in the United States.

MOSES IN U.S. HISTORY. Go back to the founding of our nation and from that time to this we have been a people who have wanted to live our lives under the rule of law. You can trace at least some of that desire back to Moses. We have been a people for whom the discussion of Liberty has been essential to who we are. We can trace that back to Moses too. You go back to the pilgrim fathers to the Mayflower Pilgrims and you find William Bradford for example who speaks about the escape of the Puritans from the rule of the oppressive King of England King James precisely in terms of Moses and the release from slavery in Egypt. Bradford spoke of "casting off the yoke of Pharaoh King of Egypt." And, further, when he arrives at Plymouth, he describes the crossing of the ocean as if it were the crossing of the desert in the days of Moses. God has brought us safely through many perils and dangers to this particular place.

Bruce Feiler, in his book *America's Prophet* (pp.8-9), writes that

"For centuries European explorers had set out for new lands without using expressions and names like Pharaoh, Promised Land, new Covenant and new Israel, Exodus and Moses. By choosing these evocative lyrics the founders of America introduced the themes of oppression and redemption, anticipation and disenchantment, freedom and law that would carry them through 400 years of American history.

In particular, Feiler points out that during the Revolution, themes relating to Moses and the Exodus were commonplace. For example, that George Washington was sometimes referred to as a new Moses for the people. And the inscription on the Liberty Bell comes straight from the Law of Moses (Leviticus 25): "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land and to all the inhabitants thereof."

And as you keep on moving down in time, 100 years later you come to the Civil War and the issue of slavery. Within the slave community, seeking their own freedom from domination, these same Mosaic themes are dominant. Not only read and spoken, but sung:

When Israel was in Egypt land let my people go.

Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.

Go down Moses, way down to Egypt land.

Tell old Pharaoh (straight from the book of Exodus in scripture) to let my people go.

So in one way or another in ancient history and in more recent history the impact of Moses has simply been enormous. This role filled by Moses as a literate leader, in some respects might have been expected, or at least not unexpected, because according to scripture, while Moses' own people the Hebrews were slaves he himself had not been a slave. Well maybe right at birth, but soon thereafter his life was transferred out of slavery so that he was raised and educated within the courts of Pharaoh the King. He was taught to be a leader within the courts of the most powerful king in the world at that time.

So, from the very beginning, Moses was trained to be a great person – though some scholars, of course, are pretty skeptical about this sequence of events in Moses' life. Some scholars see the whole idea that Moses was raised in the courts of Pharaoh as mythological. And then there are others who are even more skeptical – who think that Moses himself is a complete fabrication. If you turn on your television you'll sometimes find some history programs about Moses, picking up on this very skeptical view.

MOSES IN SCHOLARSHIP. I just wanted to say a quick word about this kind of academic skepticism this morning, and that word is this: that you really cannot prove things either way. The only way to “prove” something exists is in fact to find some archeological artifact which had an inscription on it saying something like “Moses was here,” and dating it to the right time and the right place. The absence of information (“the argument from silence”), generally speaking, does not mean that you can dismiss something as never having happened -- the evidence may be there, but not yet discovered. Go back 100 years in archeology and most evidence we rely on to piece together the ancient world had not yet been discovered. So silence does not prove anything. On the other hand, most positive evidence is not quite as conclusive as an ancient inscription – but it certainly blunts the more aggressive skeptical voices.

Let me share with you just a few bits and pieces of our knowledge that put the story of Moses into historical perspective, and which increase the possibility of the stories being substantially true.

- For example, outside of the scripture we know that the Egyptians in their royal courts educated foreigners. Not just themselves but foreigners. So the story of Moses' education certainly fits into the more general Egyptian information we know.
- We know that the dating of the coming of the people of Israel into Palestine can in fact be fixed by what's known as the Merneptah Stele which speaks about the people of Israel in the Holy Land around 1200 BC.

- We know that the city of Raameses (mentioned in Exodus 1:11) was only known as Raameses for a 200 year period around 1200BC. Otherwise it was known as Avaris.
- We know that Moses' name is not a Hebrew name but is in fact an Egyptian name. I've just mentioned the name Rameses in connection with a city, though it is also the name of Egypt's king: Rameses. Change the vowels (which can be done with Semitic languages and another way of pronouncing Rameses is Ra-Moses. The last part of which is Moses. Ra-Moses is the Moses who gives allegiance to the Sun God, Ra. So the name Moses is in fact a quite legitimate Egyptian name from that particular period of time.
- We then have finally just the issue which bothers many people with the Exodus story – the issue of the huge numbers of people coming out of slavery: the scripture says there were 600,000 men not including women and children (Exodus 12:7). So people say “Goodness, that’s over a million people who were crossing over the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land; that’s pretty inconceivable – and I would probably join them . . . having taken 40 people on a trip to the Promised Land! The idea of a million, well, I don’t think I’m going to do that any time soon. But to say the number is much smaller than the Biblical number is not to say that there’s a huge mistake here, because the translation of the word “thousand” in Hebrew can have different meanings that are quite legitimate. The word “thousand” (*eleph*) can be understood in two ways: literally as an exact thousand, but also generally, like the word “bunch.” . . . thousands of people . . . a whole bunch of people. This is not to shrink it down to just a handful of people. There would still be thousands (!) of slaves leaving Egypt, in fact 600 large groups (a hundred in each?), and not necessarily 600,000.

MOSES AT THE END, BEGINNING AND MIDDLE OF LIFE. So these are just a few thoughts on the historical side. Not proof, but not the absence of evidence either. But coming back to this great figure, this image of Moses as a great leader, back to what we find in the pages of scripture: he is an author; he is an inspirer of scripture even if he didn't write all the books himself; he is a lawgiver; he is a freedom fighter; he is this person of great personal wisdom and great personal strength. That's how we see Moses toward the end of his life – and also at the beginning of his life.

But when we come in our passage of scripture to Exodus 3 and 4, what we see is a different picture of Moses: you've got the greatness at the end; you've got the greatness at the beginning; but in the middle, in Exodus 3 and 4, you have a Moses presented to us who is just a normal, average human being, carrying within his life the weaknesses and fears and doubts that many of us, perhaps all of us, face from time to time.

In his early years he had been this go getter. Trained at the courts of Pharaoh, with a great education. No doubt proud of his education, thinking that he could change the world. So he tried in his own strength to liberate his own people. He knew he wasn't Egyptian. He knew who his people were. He knew they were slaves, and felt their oppression. He tried to liberate them in his own strength – but failed absolutely miserably. He killed a man along the way, and had to flee

for his life. And so he goes into the middle of nowhere, quite literally into the wilderness, for decades. He lives his life in the middle of nowhere. He takes a back seat; he becomes a bystander. He is on the sideline. He has no intention of playing in the major leagues. All he wants to do is to be a shepherd, and take care of his father-in-law Jethro's sheep. Let me be a shepherd and take care of the sheep and that's it!

So after the great beginning, Moses is now in the wilderness. And that's when God comes calling, and sets up this great audio-visual presentation of a bush that is burning but is not consumed. And God speaks to Moses and says, *"I've heard the prayers of my people. The cries you heard when you were young, I have heard those cries too. They're in slavery in Egypt and I want to set them free and I am on the lookout for a leader, and I've come to recruit you, draft you into my plans and into my purposes. You are my first choice, my first pick."* And Moses this great one balks. Moses doesn't want to do it. And at first he will not do it. This educated leader filled with fire in his youth says, *"Wait, wait a minute. Not me."* He loses confidence and begins to make one excuse after another. *"Who am I to do this? I don't know anybody. Maybe I did at one time but now I have no connections. I can't do this. My skills have gone – just good at looking after sheep. Who are you? I hardly know who you are. And yet you want me to do this enormous thing. And what about them? I mean the Egyptians and my people the Hebrew people, when I turn up why would they believe me? And besides that, I just can't speak in public. If you're going to be a leader you need to be able to speak in public. But my voice quivers. My knees shake. My brain freezes all at the wrong time."* And then Moses ends it all up by saying, *"Please, please, please send someone else. Send someone else."*

MOSES AND THE CREATOR GOD WHO CALLS. By which time God gets pretty angry, because God has already made a great promise to Moses. He has promised that he would "be with" Moses. This is not a casual promise "I'll be with you." It's far more like the Celtic Blessing (called "St Patrick's Breastplate"): I'll be with you; I'll be in you; I'll be above you; I'll be beneath you; I'll be behind you; I'll be before you. I will be with you. That is, it's a promise which says, "Make no mistake about it, the creator God will be with you to do whatever needs to be done." And God has given this promise to Moses. But it doesn't faze Moses, it doesn't change Moses. So God then reminds Moses that the one who is with him is really the creator God who made him, and if that Moses doesn't feel he can do what God wants, then since God is the one who made him, he can also remake him and reshape him to do what needs to be done.

Who gives speech to morals? Says God. Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord? Now go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.

(Exodus 4:11)

This assurance doesn't give confidence to Moses either. But then God, even in his anger, gives Moses a third option, as if to say, *"Well, if I and my promises are not sufficient, I've got your brother! He'll help you out. He can speak even if you can't. The two of you can figure it out together as to who says what, where, and when!"* And only then, with this third assurance, the

combination of assurances, does Moses soften up and accept the call, and return to Egypt to begin a new chapter not only in his life, but a new chapter in human history, with massive, massive implications for the future and for us even to this day.

In the 1800s Oliver Wendell Homes, Sr. is reputed to have said this:

The greatest tragedy in America is not the destruction of our natural resources, though that tragedy is great. The truly great tragedy is the destruction of our human resources by our failure to fully utilize our abilities which means that *most men and women go to their graves with the music still in them.*

Most men and women got to their graves with the music still in them. Sometimes this is true sadly because we feel deeply our own inadequacy. And so we're scared. In 1946, as WWI is concluding, Robert Frost the poet spoke to a Jewish congregation in Cincinnati and he said this.

Many men have the kind of wisdom that will do well enough in the day's work, living along, fighting battles, going to wars, striving with each other in war or in peace. Sufficient wisdom, they do well enough. But if they have religious nature inside they constantly tremble a little with the fear one's wisdom – one's human wisdom is not quite acceptable in God's sight. Always I hear inside that word acceptable, always the fear that it may not be quite acceptable. (*Going By Contraries*, p. 181)

And so the music never comes out. It's still there on the inside.

Sometimes, though, it's a matter of a pride that keeps the music on the inside, from never being played, or from only coming out in a discordant fashion.

In the June 2011 *Harvard Business Review*, Thomas and Sarah DeLong write about this in their article "Managing Yourself: the Paradox of Excellence."

Why is it that so many smart ambitious professionals are less productive and satisfied than they should or could be? We've counseled between us over 600 professional executives and managers over a combined 35 years and seen this time and time again. Many high performers would rather do the wrong thing well than do the right thing poorly. [DR: as if to say, 'Let me just stick with the familiar and do the wrong thing well than the right thing poorly']. And when they do find themselves in over-their-head they're often unwilling to admit it even to themselves and refuse to ask for the help that they need.

So no music flows. All the volume is muted or the sound is discordant for one reason or another when God wants the music to flow.

There is only one reason we know this story about Moses that we read in Exodus 3 and 4, a moment when the music could just as easily been stuck inside Moses; only one reason that enables me to share the story with you today about Moses' repeated excuses – and that reason is that Moses was not afraid to share the story! Moses was not embarrassed to share the story, to tell the story on himself. And he didn't just share it on Facebook! He shared it in the book which

would become the best seller of all time, so that the whole wide world (though he wasn't to know it at the time) would hear the story, not only of his greatness but of his weakness; hear of that day in which he poured out his excuses one after the other to Almighty God.

I think that if you were to have asked Moses what the greatest day in his life would have been I think he would have said it was that day at the burning bush. To be sure, there were other great days to choose from. I mean, the crossing of the Red Sea, what about that day? That's a great day! The freedom of the people from slavery! And what about the days on the mountain, Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God? Those were pretty spectacular days. But Moses draws our attention to this day, when he's watching sheep, minding his own business, and turns aside to this bush. A day in which instead of saying "Oh wow, you are truly God. I'm willing to do anything you want," he pours out his excuses to God. And does so again and again, only to discover that God will still not let him go; that God hasn't changed his mind; that Moses is the one that God wants.

So now . . .

- armed with the promise of God, which at long last means something to him – *that God will be with him*, not just in general "somewhere out there," but here, right now, within and around him,
- and armed with the reminder that God made him and can reshape our tongues, our hearts, our lives, our limbs to accomplish God's will, at any time God the creator wants,
- and armed with the knowledge that even if that doesn't happen, God can provide other people to supplement our weaknesses and help us,

Moses, finally says "Yes"! – believing now that his life could be transformed and could be transforming in the lives of others. What a great day that was. A confrontation with God! A wrestling in prayer with true honesty before God, until you come to realize that God knows best and will lead us on, and provide us with everything we need, not only to be blessed but to be a source of blessing to others. May each of us know that same kind of confrontation with God, that same honesty which deepens faith more than just about anything else can do; a confrontation which seems at first to be driven by doubt, but which is so often the first step and breath towards deep and abiding and life-changing faith. Amen.

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