

Healthy Leadership 4: Leaders Are Born and Made

Exodus 2:1-10

The Pathway to Healthy Leadership: Studies in Exodus on Moses as Leader

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. As we come to you today, Almighty God, we recognize your sovereignty but also your mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. We come in the midst of those difficulties and troubles of life that may even feel oppressive, at times, knowing that you have called us to prosper in faith, in the midst of trouble; and that you have called us to nurture those who are younger, to be in full relationship with you, and to see the trouble as a place of nourishment of Almighty God in the power of your Spirit. May your Word now speak to us according to that purpose; in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Exodus, chapters 1 and 2, God is not very visible in an overt way; but God is behind-the-scenes and acting through the faithfulness of leaders — mostly women— who are willing to take their faith and use it, even if it causes resistance to civil authority, and to the difficulty of the moment. My parents, when I was a baby, brought me into a worship service; it was not Presbyterian in that context, but it was a commitment on their part to bring me into the presence of God and dedicate me to God's service. We, as the people of God, from ancient times, have put our children on the altar and have been willing to commit our lives to their faithful development. While they are born in a family of faith, they must be nurtured and grown in those families of faith.

Exodus, chapters 1 and 2, are about the struggle that the people of God have to raise their children in that faith. While Israel is growing numerically, the larger they get, the more Pharaoh, king of Egypt, becomes afraid of their population growth. So he decides to invoke laws that would shorten their growth patterns. He first decides that the midwives who are there at birth with the mothers of Israel would take the children immediately and kill them at birth. The midwives are very crafty in their understanding of interpreting that law and they're always a little late to the birth. And they say, "But Pharaoh, our Hebrew women are so strong that they birth these children before we get there." Pharaoh seems to buy that argument (I've always been amazed at that!), but then he goes on to think of another way to do in the male children of Israel. And that is, that he would invoke all of the people of Egypt— when they see a little male child, that they would take the initiative to throw that child into the Nile and kill them. Well, Moses is born in this environment— a high-threat place where children are endangered. But the parents of Moses, as many of the Hebrew parents, are very savvy about taking literally the action of Pharaoh and trying to enact it in gracious ways. So they do put their baby son in the Nile—albeit in a carefully-crafted ark— so that he floats. The parents have shown, over and over again, their faith commitment to nurture their children in, not the household of Pharaoh, but the way of Almighty God.

Now Moses, when he is adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, grows up in a second household. His first household was the household of the Hebrews; his second, the household of Pharaoh. When he is old enough, he must come to the place where he chooses which household he will serve. And that is an important choice to lead every child to: Do I serve God, or do I serve some household on earth? Moses chooses to serve the household of the Hebrews; but in his own adolescent perspective, he takes matters into his own hands. Rather than talk with the slave owner who was hurting the Hebrew, he kills him. Moses exercises his own anger... his own judgment... his own retribution. And because of that, he has to leave Egypt and go into hiding. God uses all of these events and experiences in Moses' life, from birth on, to prepare him to lead the people of God: his family; his culture; his trouble; his adversaries; his parents; his experiences; his mistakes; his running away; his hiding; and his new circumstances. God brings women and men into his life to be able to nurture him and make him a leader in God's pattern for the future.

We know that leaders are born into families; and those families are called to nurture those children to become responsible adults, in certain cultures, and in certain circumstances. But genetics cannot be overestimated or overstated as the Number One reason for leadership. Yes, Moses was a fine baby; but that didn't make him a leader. Healthy and strong and good looking at three months of age; it was the context of pain and struggle, carefully mentored by people of faith, that brought Moses to the places of leadership. An old view of leadership still haunts us in some ways: that leaders have to be born in the right context... with the right family... with the right education... with the right pattern of life... or they really can't grow up to lead. I hope we understand that, from the biblical faith perspective, that that simply is not valid.

We see a big example of this in the eighth chapter of First Samuel, where God is forced to call a king to leadership in Israel. The first choice that God makes is a king by the name of Saul. This is what the text says about Saul: he is handsome. In fact, he is more handsome than any other man in all of Israel. Not only that, but he's a head-and- shoulders taller than everybody else around him. No one can compare, according to Samuel; his fineness, and good looks, and sense of call to be a leader, by the people. But Saul began to do his own thing. Saul began to listen to his own view of reality and turn away from God. And Samuel notes to Saul one day: "Saul, you are so little in your own eyes that you can't help but make yourself bigger than you really are." And so Saul builds a monument for himself on top of Mt. Carmel. Samuel quickly sees that this is not the kind of leader that's going to help Israel in the future. When Saul is rejected as king and Samuel is called to ordain somebody else, it is these words that ring from the voice of God: Do not look at this next candidate's appearance or the height of his stature; for the Lord does not see what mortals see. While we look on the outward, the Lord looks at the heart. All too often, as people, we tend to pick leaders who look good and sound good; that have the right level of charisma; but we neglect to explore the depths of their heart. God is all about preparing leaders who have hearts—not only of faith, but for people—and for the ability to lead people in the midst of difficulty.

I was once interviewed by a committee, in my early 30s, from a major church in this country; I will not say the name. They came to hear me preach. And the first five questions I will never forget, in interview process: 1. "How tall are you?" I told them. And they said, "Well, you know, no one has ever preached in our pulpit under the height of 6-foot 4-inches tall." Okay—I made the first cut. 2. "And do you have a dark wool suit?" For that day, I was wearing a light wool suit; and in California style it seemed appropriate. But

from this church, it was not. 3. “What kind of car do you drive?” Fortunately, I was driving an Oldsmobile and that was acceptable to the committee. And they said, 4. “Where did you go to college and (5.) seminary?” And I, unfortunately, did not have the right pedigree there. It’s interesting to note that their concern for me was my appearance... my pedigree... my wardrobe... my consumer choices... way before they asked me any questions about who I am and what my life experience has been in my discipleship. I believe that part of the problem in America continues to be that we tend to pick leaders more out of their appearance, and their sound, and their charisma, than we pick out of the development of their character— particularly in the difficult times of life. I believe that is also a temptation in terms of our choices of governmental leaders and businesses. If there’s anything we can learn from the text here and from Scripture in general, it is: that we must pick leaders like God does— when we read their hearts, and we see the depth of faith, and their experience of life, as they have lived it out.

It is important to note, that, while most texts would affirm that Moses would have been mentored by men, there were no men left to mentor Moses at the time he was growing up. He, in fact, is mentored by 12 women: two Hebrew midwives, one Hebrew Mom, one Hebrew sister, Pharaoh’s daughter, and seven daughters of Reuel. How could Moses possibly become a great leader surrounded by so many women? God, in fact, uses one man—and that’s Reuel himself— to bring Moses to a place of health and reformation. I would argue the case that that is a part of his priestly, healthy development, on the positive side. He needed to learn some of the patterns that the women could teach him—about how to prosper in tough circumstances. In my own life, I was not only mentored by my mother, but by a woman who adopted me at the university, and by another woman who trained me in ministry. Now, while I have several men who have mentored me in my life, it was important that I understand that those women who mentored me were particularly strong in bringing a relational component and depth of spirituality to the relationship. In fact, the woman who mentored me while I was at college began to know me so well, that, when I was dating her daughter, and her daughter decided to marry a doctor instead of me, she said, “That’s not acceptable to me.” She said, “If my daughter is not wise enough to marry you, I’m going to find somebody who is.” And she did! She introduced me to the woman who would become my wife.

That is the kind of mentoring, guidance, and nurture that we continue to need to put into people’s lives as they grow into young adulthood, and into adulthood. The church needs to be a place where, like the children of God, we mentor our next generations until they become full, responsible, accountable adults. Another aspect of this is that the people who nurture Moses are of priestly families. It is not kings; it is not princes; but it is, in fact, the Levite family of mother and father, and the Midianite priest that mentors Moses into leadership. God’s way of leadership is not built in kingdoms; it is not built in places where the power is from the top down. It is built in places where people learn to serve God and serve one another. For the priests are in the role of parent, and coach, and teacher—where we teach our children to love God and love their neighbor as themselves, and to respect humanity—because priests connect people to God, and they connect people to each other. It is much better for our children to be raised in priestly environments than it is for them to be raised in ‘kingly’ and ‘queenly’ environments. If you are a parent or a grandparent, a coach or a teacher, you are called to be priests to your children. Everything you do and say either draws a child into the presence of God, or pushes him away. If you live in faith and your children see that, whether you name that overtly or not, they absorb the reality of being invited into a priestly kind of leadership.

We also see in Moses’ life that he makes a significant mistake. And we have sometimes seen leaders who make mistakes, who cannot recover from that. But God is not the God who continually sets a leader aside. God is a God who brings that leader back into redemptive purposes; and that’s the way it is with Moses. While he leaves Egypt a criminal, and he hides out in Midian, God is not done with him yet. Moses’ temptation, however, is to misuse a pattern of leadership that he probably saw in Pharaoh’s house: rather than become a priest, he decides to become the judge... jury... and executioner... of people with whom he disagrees. At some point along the way, the nurture of God, in the process of Moses growing up, needs to change that pattern. But you can know that Moses always struggled with this. For we see Moses on the top of the mountain, when he hears the rumblings of the people of God down below, as they’re worshipping other gods; and he comes down, and he dismantles, by throwing down the tablets of God and destroying them. That was not something God wanted him to do; that was Moses’ anger. And we also know that situation where God says, ‘I want you to speak to the rock so that water can come out of it.’ And Moses is so angry he hits the rock twice. What God is trying to teach Moses, in his nurture and growing up to be a leader, is that he should not use force, but he should use his strength of character to lead.

I’m a fan of John Wooden, the basketball coach of the U.C.L.A. basketball team for many years. I was fortunate, when I was dating my future wife, she was a student at U.C.L.A. and she was able to get tickets to the U.C.L.A. basketball games at \$.25 a head. Needless to say, we had many dates watching Bill Walton and John Wooden as coach! John Wooden is noted, by many people, to be one of the foremost examples of healthy leadership and healthy leadership development, in our country today. John Wooden tells a story about his father and the environment when he was growing up on an Indiana farm with his Dad. There were, nearby, deep gravel pits that had been dug so that farmers were invited by the county to go into the gravel pits and pull out whole wagon loads of gravel with their mules and horses. The county paid for the farmers to go in there, fill up and come out. One day, John Wooden with his father, saw a young man—a young farmer who was stuck on the slippery slope coming out of the gravel pit. And he was getting more and more frustrated with his horses. He got to the point where he was cursing them, yelling at them, and hitting them with a whip. And the more accelerated his anger became, the more the horses just dug-in and stopped. Finally, his Dad had seen enough and walked over and said, “Would you mind if I give you some help?” The young man, relieved, said, “I could use some.” The Dad came up to the horse on one side, stroked its nose and whispered in its ear kind words. He patted him on the side and went to the same way, the other horse on the other side. And after being with them in quietness and gentleness for period of time, he went behind them and took the reins, came back in front of them, and gave a little whistle. And the horses pulled that wagon out as fast as they could. John Wooden’s point is this: Don’t use force rather than strength, knowledge, and wisdom. Too many people love control and resort to force and intimidation; apply strength in a measured and gentle manner. And he would often quote Abraham Lincoln, “There is nothing stronger than gentleness.”

I believe that that’s what priests teach children, teenagers, and young adults. There is nothing stronger than gentleness. God doesn’t leave Moses in his brokenness and his sin either. God brings Moses into a community—a family who can be a redemptive presence in his life. It includes seven daughters. And that community repairs and restores, renews and reforms Moses, and prepares Moses to be called by God to lead Israel out of Egypt. My own daughters, when they decided that we, as parents, had done what we could do for

them, fortunately were in a church like this and they adopted other parents who helped them to grow even further than we could take them. As I've said on a couple of occasions, there will be moments when your teenagers will declare you 'unclean' and they need to turn to other adults for leadership and help. That's one of the great purposes of the Church—that we've committed to today, in terms of baptism. That it is not just parents alone that are raising children, but entire church communities that raise children. And we do not give up on them until they are completely-formed adults.

God uses all things. God redeems all things in the life of a young man or woman, to help them to grow into leadership. It isn't just about being born in the right family at the right time; it's about God taking all of the tough stuff, all of the difficulties, and in a priestly environment, training that young person to grow to become a complete leader in Jesus Christ. And what we see in Jesus himself, in Luke, chapter 2 is that even Jesus himself was nurtured in family. And even when he felt called to go into the household of God, he went home to be in obedience to his own parents and waited for the right time for God to call him into ministry. If it is true for Jesus, that he would be nurtured in priestly functions growing up and be nurtured as a young adult, isn't it more true that we, too, need to be in that pattern of life? And so, today, let us be a National Presbyterian Church that sees that national leaders are nurtured in real families, in a real church, from the time that they are born until the time that they are ready to lead. And let's not give up on any of them. For God has called them to lead in the pattern of Jesus Christ. Let us pray. Our Lord, we are grateful that you have not abandoned us, but that you are present, by the power of your Spirit, to help us, as families and as a church, to raise our children, to nurture our youth, and to mentor our young adults into full responsibility, even in the midst of the most difficult times. So may you help us to do that, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.