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The National Presbyterian Church

Moses' Prayer: Leave Me Alone

Exodus 3:1 – 4:17

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In our sermons through the first few weeks and couple of months of this year we're looking together at the subject of prayer. And not merely the subject of prayer, but looking together at *particular prayers* that are contained in Holy Scripture.

- You find most of them in the Book of Psalms: we looked at the Book of Psalms last summer, and you find there poems and hymns and prayers from God's ancient people.
- But you can also find these prayers scattered throughout many other books in the Bible. Some are offered by those who have been in touch with God and long to be faithful servants of God, and some by those who are running away from God, and yet who still speak to God. Some are informal and some are formal.

We've already looked at one of these prayers: it comes from our Lord Jesus Himself. It's the prayer He taught His disciples that we call the Lord's Prayer. It's a set prayer, a prayer which was designed to be prayed and used as a teaching tool. And that's how we've used it in the last six weeks. But as we enter the season of Lent, leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we move on to consider four other prayers. There are many others, but these four prayers that I've chosen from scripture are far less formal than the Lord's Prayer, far more spontaneous, far more rising out of the troubles and the difficulties and the passions of life.

- So we'll be looking at a prayer by a woman in scripture by the name of Hanna. (1 Samuel 2:1ff)
- We'll be looking at a prayer from a man who becomes a great prophet whose name is Samuel. (1 Samuel 3:10)
- We'll be looking at the person who is really rather obscure but nevertheless who prays to God whose name is Jabez. (1 Chronicles. 4:10)

And we are looking today at a prayer from the person who is mentioned in our scripture reading that is Moses – the prayer of Moses that we find in Chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Exodus.

Now many of you are familiar with Moses. Some of you have read about Moses in the Bible. Perhaps you've read about him since childhood. Some of you may not be familiar with him from reading the Bible but you may be familiar with him from movies.

- If you are of a certain generation then you might identify Moses with Charlton Heston! That's who Moses obviously looked like – like Charlton Heston in the 1956 movie, "The Ten Commandments."
- Or if you're of a different generation you might have learned about Moses from Disney and the 1998 movie, "The Prince of Egypt."

But whether it's through popular media or through the scripture, indeed, whether or not we're familiar with Moses at all, I want to recap some of the highlights of Moses' life and the significance of his life, because these form the context, the background and the foreground of the prayer that he prays in Exodus Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

What we need to keep in mind about Moses more than anything else is that Moses was a great, powerful, and enormously influential figure in history. Not just one of thousands, but perhaps even one of the top 30 or 40 most influential people in the course of human history. In fact, I would actually put him in the top 10! And in this, I'm not speaking merely from a religious point of view but from a secular point of view as well. His accomplishments have impacted hundreds of thousands, and indeed millions of people, for a span of three thousand years.

What we know about Moses is this: He lives somewhere between 1300 - 1200 years before the birth of Christ, at a time when his people, the people of Israel (who at that time were sometimes called the Hebrew people) were in bondage. They were slaves in Egypt: indeed, they were among the slaves who were involved in building some of the great cities and monuments of that country.

One of the tiny little pieces of information that we find in Exodus Chapter 1 that helps us date Moses is a verse of scripture (Exodus 1:11) that says that the people of Israel were helping to build the city of Rameses. Now this is important to the historians because this particular city was only called the city of Rameses for a period of 200 years. Before that it was called Avaris, and after that it was called Tanis. But historians and archeologists know that for a period of some 200 years it was called the city or the house of Rameses. And so Exodus is historically on target at this point, dating Moses to a period of time between 1300 – 1100 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. So if the slaves were involved in the construction, then we can move more specifically into the earlier part of that time span. That's when Moses was born.

What we know from Exodus is that Moses was raised not by his own people but within the royal house of Egypt. So there he is from this foreign tribe in the land of Egypt, raised in the house of Egypt, given an education which he could never have had had he not been adopted into the royal family. There he grows up.

And there as a young man he comes to realize that he really doesn't quite belong in the royal household. He comes to realize that he belongs to these other people. And these other people are slaves, they are being oppressed. And like many a young person he finds welling up within him a sense of injustice and unfairness that this should be happening to these people – these people whom he discovers to be his own people. And he decides as a growing young man to take matters into his own hand to deliver his people from oppression. But in doing this in his own way, in his own strength, by his own hand he messes things up. By accident he kills one of the Egyptians and word gets out and he has to flee for his life.

So Moses leaves Egypt, suddenly and quickly, heading into the middle of nowhere, into the desert that's sometimes called Horeb, and sometimes Sinai (they're the same place). There he becomes a shepherd, marries, raises a family, in the middle of nowhere until the third phase of his life begins, 40 years later.

1. Phase One he's in Egypt. He has this amazing upbringing in the house of the king, the Pharaoh.
2. Phase Two he has to flee for his life. He's in the middle of nowhere for 40 years, for a long period of time as if everyone and everything has forgotten him.

And then Phase Three: God speaks to him and calls, gives him the most stunning call to return to Egypt at the moment when he thinks he's forgotten, forgotten by God.

God has not forgotten him. No matter where we are, no matter how far from what we think is the center of the universe God knows us and knew Moses, and calls him to change his way of life completely:

*From being a failure, from being a farmer, from being a family man,
God calls Moses to become a liberator, a general, and a nation builder.
His life is changed completely.*

This all seems rather absurd. It's almost as if you were talking to a child and you say what do you want to be when you grow up? Oh I want to be a general. I want to be an important person, this or that or the next thing. And sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. But here is this call from God to do these astounding things, each astounding in its own right: a liberator of a whole group of people, a general of a great army, and a builder of a new nation. And Moses does it.

Moses heeds the call and he actually does it! Almost single handedly he does it.

If we're looking for a parallel of Moses in history the greatest parallel I think that I can find is from our own nation: it's George Washington. There's

George Washington and he just wants to be a farmer, right? But he becomes a liberator and he becomes a general and he becomes a nation builder – but not by himself. Not in the same way as with Moses. It's as if Moses is a bringing together of George Washington and everybody else who's involved in the Continental Congress, everybody else who's involved in the Declaration of Independence, everybody else who's involved in the writing of the Constitution. All of these come together in this one amazing and remarkable character.

Single-handedly he goes back to Egypt and with great courage confronts the most powerful king of the age just as George Washington did with King George, and pesters him enough until he says "Take your people, go away, leave the land, be gone."

Single-handedly he turns this rabble of free slaves into an army which fights against its opponents. Now make no mistake about it. This was a dog-eat-dog world. If they did not defend themselves there they would have been slaughtered, every man, woman and child. He turns them into an army and he becomes a general.

Single-handedly he holds the people together when they want to return to Egypt, when they say, "Hey, wait a minute – this path of freedom is longer and harder than we ever thought. We don't like it here. Who are you to take us here?" He holds onto the people and keeps them together when they would split and divide and return to their former life.

Single-handedly in a pluralistic world rather like our world today, he develops (given by revelation from God but he implements the plan) a great monotheistic religion – the worship of the one God, the creator God, the redeeming God; and he sets in place all the background that sustains that religion – the priesthood, the sacrifices and the prayers that would characterize Israel's faith all the way through the building of the tabernacle to the building of the temple until it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. He establishes a faith that would be followed for generations to come.

Single-handedly he gave this people a constitution, the Ten Commandments, which would then be the source of a whole series of laws which would fill the pages of scripture and guide the people of ancient Israel for years to come, and which would become the foundation of Christian civilization.

Single-handedly these commandments along with the stories of God's ancient people were proclaimed and single handedly he made sure they would be preserved whether orally or in writing. Moses' work served as the foundation of the book, this very book which, remarkably, we turn to Sunday after Sunday. This book, the Bible, would not come into existence or have any of its influence were it not for this one single figure impacting the Jewish faith, impacting the Christian faith and impacting the faith of Islam too – so that all of us together are (as Islam would say) 'the people of the book'.

So you see, there is no question that Moses' impact on human history has simply been enormous. Here is a towering figure, a towering figure in the development of

civilization as we know it – hard to emulate. *And many people know this.* They may not have put it together like this but many people know this, that he is a truly important figure.

But what many people do not know is what I've left out of this story, and that is this: that the one who became a **towering figure** before his call to enter Phase Three of his life, at the end of Phase Two when he is in the middle of nowhere, *is also a cowering figure* who really does not want to do what God calls him to do. He is filled with fear. He is filled with apprehension. And when he prays to God about this, his prayer is nothing other than a protracted series of doubts and questions and excuses all blended into a fairly chaotic conversation with God.

But that's what prayer is. Sometimes it's formal, sometimes it's neat, sometimes it's tidy; but sometimes it's just a chaotic conversation with God.

And that is the case with this great towering figure when God calls him into His service.

I want to read to you an extended section of Exodus Chapter 3-4, where this conversation takes place. And I want to highlight Moses' words, his prayer, the questions, the excuses, the doubts and the fears that he offers to God. So here's the story again.

Moses is doing what he does every day: he takes care of sheep in the middle of nowhere minding his own business. He sees a bush that's burning but is not consumed. It's strange, so he goes up to look at it, and there's a voice in this bush which calls his name – "*Moses, Moses.*" And Moses says "*Here I am.*" And that's the beginning of the prayer, that's how the prayer starts: "*Here I am.*" It's a response to God actually.

And God says "*Come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet for the place in which you are standing is Holy ground. I am the God of your father, of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.*"

And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "*I've observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I've heard their cry. I know their sufferings. I've come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. So come I will send you to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.*" [Yes, You!]

But Moses said to God [and here's an expression of self doubt]: "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*"

The Lord said, "*I will be with you.*" [This is a wonderful promise of God. It's the one that Jesus repeats at the end of Matthew's gospel, 28:20, when he sends the disciples out into the world: "*Lo I am with you always to the end of age.*"] *and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who sent you when you have brought the people out of Egypt – you shall worship God on this mountain, Mount Horeb (= Mount Sinai).*

But Moses said to God [and here he's beginning to question God]: "*If I come to the Israelites and say to them the God of your ancestors has sent me and they ask me what is his name? What shall I say to them?*"

God said to Moses, "I am who I am. Say to the Israelites I Am has sent me to you. The Lord, the God of your ancestors. The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob has sent me to you. This is my name forever."

Then Moses answered, [another doubt, another kind of questioning of God]:
"But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me but say the Lord did not appear to you?"

The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" [pointing to Moses' rod or staff.] "Throw it on the ground."

So Moses threw the rod on the ground and it became a snake and Moses drew back from it. Again the Lord said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak."

He put his hand into his cloak and when he took it out his hand was leprous. When he took it out again it was restored like the rest of his body. "If they will not believe you," says the Lord, "or heed the first sign they may believe the second sign."

But Moses said to the Lord, [and here's his grand excuse!]: "Oh my Lord, I've never been eloquent neither in the past nor even now that You have spoken to Your servant but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? 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." [And then here's the final prayer request, the great request of this towering figure whose life changed the course of human history.]

But Moses said, "O My Lord, please send someone else."

That's the conclusion of the prayer: "O my Lord, please send someone else!" In other words, leave me alone. Go away. Please send someone else.

And then the scripture goes on, "then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses" – but not so angry that God leaves him. God said "No!" to Moses' request to leave him alone, but, nevertheless keeps pursuing Moses, even through Moses' doubts, fears, and rudeness! And says, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you what you shall do. Now take in your hand this rod with which you shall perform the signs."

And Moses does it.

And staggeringly he becomes this liberator, this general, this builder of a new nation from scratch. This covering figure becomes a towering figure of history; after praying this discombobulated prayer his life is changed.

Let me summarize that prayer in case you didn't get it. Let me take out all of God's words and just leave you with a basic summary of Moses' words. This is how his prayer goes:

Here I am. Who am I? What shall I say? Suppose they say? I cannot speak! Send someone else! Amen.

That's his prayer. That's Moses' prayer:

Here I am. Who am I? What shall I say? Suppose they say? I cannot speak! Send someone else! Amen.

That's his prayer. And I, for one, take enormous comfort in this prayer that this is the prayer of this towering figure used by God to change the course of human history. In fact, without it I have to tell you, I wouldn't be standing here today. Now some of you would say well that would be a good thing. But [LAUGHTER], truly without the comfort and strength I have drawn from this prayer I wouldn't be standing here today.

This particular prayer played a huge part in my sense of God's call to the ministry.

When I first began to think that the ministry might be God's call for me I was scared to death. At that time I couldn't bear to speak in public. I was a teenager and I never ever spoke in front of other people. When I was asked to do it I would shake in my boots for weeks beforehand. I would be scared to death at the thought.

And then this sense of call came. First of all it's in the head and you're saying "Am I nuts? Is this God? Or just me?" And then some other people out of the blue said, "Have you thought about going into the ministry?" Just out of the blue, these people come along and you begin to say "Well maybe God is in this." And I'm wrestling with this for two years saying, "But I can't do the most important thing which is at the basis of the call: I cannot speak! What do you want to do with me God? Do you want to set me up to fail and embarrass me? That's what you want?" That was part of my prayer to God at this time: "Is that what you want to do with me? I don't like you! I don't like this idea! I cannot do it!"

And then I read this passage of scripture. I was still scared. But I realized I had to pursue the call. An opportunity came in the summer of 1973 to go from Scotland to spend a summer in Canada working in a small church. And I said to myself (and I've shared this with some of you) "I have to do it. I have to preach there. And this is a good place to do it: because I don't know anybody there and if I fail well I'll just go home and nobody will know that I ever came here in the first place." And so I did this. In the summer of 1973 I had the opportunity to preach every week that summer.

But before the first sermon, and I'd never preached anywhere before, before the first sermon in this little church on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, I was in the robing room, and for about a half hour before I went out to the chancel, I read and reread this particular passage of scripture (as well as Jeremiah 1) and prayed to God. I said, "*If this is what you did with Moses maybe you can do it with me. If you made his mouth you made mine, you can give him words, maybe you can give words to me. Lord help.*"

And the moment came to go out. The first ten minutes God, and this is true to form for God(!) didn't do anything that I could conceive of as helping

me. He just let me sweat it out right there. It was scary as it could be. But, and this is the truth, around ten minutes into the service, my knees began to get stronger and the words began to come. And the thought occurred to me that if I wasn't so scared I would enjoy this. Indeed as the fear began to diminish the joy arose. And the sense that God could provide everything that was needed to fulfill His call became not just a theory but an experience – an experience that I share with you – *because I know that among you today there are others who think exactly the same way as I did: who are cowering and fearful, and need to hear that God has the power and passion to give you gifts, and has already done so, to help you take whatever that step is to fulfill the call of God for you.*

That is the most fearful thing in your life just now. But what you need to know is that with Moses and with others this is not unusual. This is where we start. And God will take whatever discombobulated prayer we offer and use it as part of an ongoing conversation so that through us, people like you and me, His will is fulfilled on this earth, as Jesus would say, “as it is in Heaven.” Whatever God is calling you to do, God can provide.

Sometimes it can be a complete change in your life. You are “here” and you must go “there”. Sometimes that's how it is, as it was with Moses: go back into the fray, from out in the middle of nowhere, go back in!

But for most people the call of God is to be exactly where you are and to stick with it when there are obstacles in the way or relationships which are difficult or other problems that come – *to be faithful-in-place*. Not just because you have to, but because God calls us to be Christ's followers right where we are, supplying whatever we need for the call of God to be fulfilled.

Take courage. Remember Moses. *A towering figure, but cowering before God when called, and praying like this: “Here I am, who am I? What shall I say? Suppose they say. I cannot speak. Send someone else!”*

Thank God that God said “No, I won't. You're the one I want.” He says that to you and me too.

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