

**Preacher:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Exodus 3:1-15

I don't know if anyone else was struggling not to picture Charleton Heston as Moses while reading the Exodus story this week, but I know I was. And as I did, I was constantly reminded of all the details that the film "The Ten Commandments" got wrong. Go back and watch it if you have four hours to spare this week and try to recall the plot lines added and omitted.

Just as Audrey commented on the story of Noah's Ark last week that maybe that story isn't as nursery room friendly as we thought. The same can be said about Moses. We like to forget that Moses ended up fleeing to the wilderness because he was a murderer. We like to forget that Pharaoh orders all the Hebrew baby boys murdered and that God's punishment on Egypt is to kill all the Egyptian firstborns. We like that the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, but we don't like to think about the Egyptian army drowning. And we definitely don't like the scene in the Hebrew camp at the base of Mt Sinai after Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments and found that the people had made an idol. We cannot forget that Moses commanded the Levites to slaughter their own people as a result, and 3000 are killed. Exodus is a tough book. Many of you keep reminding me that this is why we are a New Testament people, right? And we are a New Testament people, but we don't get to the New Covenant without living through the Old; and parts of that New Covenant will surprise you too.

But speaking about the covenant last week, Pastor Audrey examined the covenantal promises of Genesis—promises made between God and the Patriarchs—Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. If you remember, God promises Noah that he's hanging up his bow and will no longer destroy the earth with flood. God also then makes promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he will give the land of Canaan for their descendants to occupy and that their descendants will be numerous.

Well, on the outset of Exodus, the covenants aren't looking too good. The people don't have their own land at all; in fact, they are enslaved. However, they are multiplying in numbers so quickly that the Pharaoh is getting scared of revolution. So, part of the covenant is coming true. It appears the Hebrew people are on the cusp of some great change.

Prepared for a change and the fulfillment of the covenant, enters the odd story of Moses, a Hebrew raised in an Egyptian home, noticing the plight of his people, murdering an Egyptian, and fleeing the land. It sounds like someone who just awoke to consciousness, as the kids say, he got woke—woke to the moral atrocity of slavery. And he has no idea what to do but kill before fleeing in fear for his own life. You wonder what Moses' understanding of God was like before this major ethical dilemma. Did he truly believe in God or did he just go along with the culture of his religion? Did he truly have an ethic by which he lived by or does he just make that up as he goes along, like one of my class members said about the characters in Genesis last week. We know so little about where Moses was before, but his confrontation with the Egyptian taskmaster upon witnessing the abuse of his people changes everything.

What does it take for us to wake up and truly see the scandal among us? What does it take for us to wake up and truly see abuse around us? It's there, folks, but sometimes we'd prefer not to see it.

Last Sunday, when several of us heard Professor Scott Holland preach what he called, a Sermonic Story, down at the Dunker Church on Antietam Battlefield—we heard the story of an American Abolitionist and a Preacher who took a firm and strong stance against slavery during the Civil War. Moncure Conway believed that while so much of the country talked about politics and economics and unions, the fact remained that slavery was morally wrong, and,

therefore, that argument should be over with. I loved a quote that professor Holland shared from Moncure Conway who said, “Be ashamed to die until you have achieved one victory for humankind.” Essentially, “Wake up.”

Yet, even when we all know somewhere deep within us that something is morally wrong, it can take us a lifetime to wake up. Issues of racial justice reveal this most blatantly. Look at the lifetimes that have endured since America’s slavery system. Martin Luther King, Jr. was fighting for the simple right to vote without obstructions about 100 years after the emancipation proclamation, and he lived 50 years ago. And unfortunately, we still have obstacles to cross for true racial equality. When do we wake up to the moral dilemmas of our time and address unequivocally childhood hunger, homelessness, mental health, and the list goes on and on. We all know what’s right, but we don’t know what to do about it. So, to some extent, we just stay sleeping.

Well, when Moses wakes up to his people’s plight, he doesn’t know what to do either. Beyond knowing the abuse was bad, he cannot calculate a response beyond angry murder of the Egyptian. But there is someone else in the story who is calculating a response to the enslavement of Israel with far more precision.

In Exodus 3:7-10, God speaks to Moses from this burning bush, “Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So, come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’”

God woke up! It seems like God was missing for a few generations as the Israelites suffering grew worse, but from out here in the wilderness atop Mt Sinai in the land of the Midianites, the God of Israel hears the people cry out and he is ready to respond.

I wonder if Moses was confused, at first, about who this God was. Out here in a land away from his people, I don’t think he expected to encounter his family God. I think it’s important to remember that the Israelites’ understanding of monotheism, belief in one God, was unique. And frequently, the Israelites acted as though the Gods of other lands really did exist, so maybe Moses thought this was the God of his father-in-law. But the one true God identifies himself to Moses as the God of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even though God has felt far off, he’s been listening the whole time. Maybe he’s simply been waiting for someone to turn aside and notice God long enough to hear his call. Maybe he was waiting for Moses.

The story of the Burning Bush is, above all else, a story about responding to the calling of God. This theme of obeying God’s call will appear over and over as we continue in the Old Testament. God needs people to fulfill significant tasks according to his will. I’m not sure it needed to be Moses that took the time to turn aside and listen, but he was the one that heard the call.

The thing about calls from God is that most of the time God is asking us to do something we think is too big for us. For Moses, the notion of leading the people out of Egypt is daunting because of his lack of eloquence and his feeling of inadequacy. This will always be the case. And quite honestly, yes, we are inadequate because we are human. Moses is not always an excellent leader as we shall see, but he is attune enough to the voice of God to continually return to God and ask for further guidance and direction.

Methodist Bishop and Professor of Ministry at Duke Divinity School, William Willimon, tells this simple story about an inadequate future church leader. He writes, “This is really

unacceptable,' I told the first-year divinity student who had just informed me that she would once again not have her paper in on time. 'You're going to be a pastor. Pastors must be punctual. You can't stand up on Sunday and say, 'I had hoped to have a sermon for you today, but first one thing and then another came up. We're going to break up into [small] groups instead of listening to me preach today.'

'I agree with you,' she told me. 'I have few obvious gifts for ministry. I'm always late. I'm too old. I know I have no business being in seminary. I've told God that repeatedly. My being here is God's idea, not mine.' Upon reflection, I thought she had it about right. We are in ministry, in service to God and God's world, because we have been called and put here by a God who just loves to make something out of nothing."<sup>1</sup>

Moses wasn't much beyond a privileged Hebrew child, a murderer, and then a shepherd—but when Moses woke up to the moral crisis at hand, and when he was faithfully curious enough to follow a burning bush and hear the call of God, then he was ordained for a ministerial task. A task that would shape a people for all time.

But you know what? The same God that called Moses still calls. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses—that God still is longing for us to wake up to the crises at our hand, but then comes the critical second step. Upon waking up, don't rely on your own abilities, but seek the calling of God, turn aside and pay attention to the way God speaks, and obey the voice. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup>-William H. Willimon, "Summons to ministry," *Christian Century*, February 21, 2001, 7. Retrieved from Homiletics Online.