

1 Sermon, November 10, 2013

Texts: Exodus 3:1-12, Deuteronomy 32:48-52

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: Moses"

Moses is a great figure, perhaps the biggest figure in all the Old Testament. At various points in the New Testament, it is pointed out that Jesus exceeds Moses, but that only goes to show how important Moses was in the first place, if Jesus exceeded him.

There are seven great stories of Moses:

- 1 The birth of Moses and Moses being rescued by Pharaoh's daughter
- 2 The call of Moses through a burning bush
- 3 The return of Moses to Egypt and the ten plagues
- 4 The Israelites leaving Egypt through the sea
- 5 How Moses dealt with the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness
- 6 The giving of the ten commandments
- 7 Moses' dying without being able to enter the promised land.

In the person of Moses, you see the great theme of God granting freedom from slavery, and God demanding obedience.

To try to do justice to Moses in a single sermon is impossible, so I'd like to focus on just one aspect of the story of Moses: Moses' own willingness to go where God sent, because God promised to be with him.

Moses was not a perfect person. He ran away from Egypt because he had, in a fit of anger, killed an Egyptian overseer. He hid out in the hills of Midian, afraid of the mighty empire of Egypt, tending his father-in-law's flock.

Moses was not always righteous or brave.

In the story from Exodus, Moses was minding his own business, grazing his sheep on the holy mountain, Mount Sinai, when his attention was caught by a bush that burned, but did not burn up. When he looked more closely, he saw an angel in the midst of the flame, and then the very voice of God came from the bush.

With the understanding that it was the Lord, Moses took off his shoes and hid his face. These were both signs of humility. Moses took off his shoes so as not to disturb the Holy Ground. Moses hid his face not so much in

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fear as to do as little as possible to disturb God's holiness. When something is holy and precious, you respond with care.

Then Moses received his calling from God. Moses' job would be to go to Egypt, exactly the place he was most afraid of, to Pharaoh, the most powerful person in the world, to free the Israelites. God had seen the misery of the Israelites, and heard their crying, and was concerned about them.

So God was sending Moses to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt to a land where they could be free, a land where one could farm and graze.

Now Moses didn't exactly like the idea. He argued with God. His first excuse was that he was nobody special. He said, "Who am I to do this? God said, "Don't worry, I'll be with you."

Notice that God didn't say, "You're adequate for the job. You'll do fine." It wasn't about Moses' ability. It was about God being with him. Moses made himself available to God, and that was why he could do the job.

Moses' second excuse was that he didn't know God's name, and if someone would ask him by what authority he made his demands, he would have to back it up with God's name. God replied that he was the God of his ancestors, and that if he needed a name, say, "I am who I am."

Moses' third excuse was that people might not believe him. God told him to take the staff in his hand, and throw it on the ground. The staff became a snake. Then God told Moses to put his hand inside his cloak, and pull it out again, and his hand became white, as though it had leprosy. When Moses put his hand in his cloak again and pulled it out, his hand had become normal again.

Moses' fourth excuse was that he didn't speak well. God asked Moses who gave the power of speech in the first place. And then God said that Moses' brother, Aaron, was coming to meet him, and Aaron would speak for Moses.

After all his excuses had been answered by God, Moses went back to his father-in-law, and asked for a leave of absence. And then Moses went on his mission.

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Through the story of Moses you see a very human person, who threw down the tablets of the law, who was afraid of the people when they got angry, who argued with God not to destroy the people of Israel when they had worshipped a golden calf.

It's certainly not always a happy story. In fact, there's a lot of death in it. There's the death of children at the time of Moses' birth, the death of the Egyptian overseer, the death of many people in Egypt during the plagues, the death of those who had worshipped a golden calf, and more.

Moses had to deal with a lot of disbelief, complaints and grumbling. Moses was overburdened, not having time or energy to do all he was supposed to do.

Moses himself got tired of doing what God said, and never seeing God. So God gave him a glimpse of himself from the back.

Moses was placed in a very vulnerable position; that of spokesman for a downtrodden group to an all-powerful ruler. What little power Moses had was due to God.

Moses had the position of being a bringer of bad news – never easy, especially at a time when kings would often kill the messenger bringing bad news.

His first bit of bad news to Pharaoh was: you've got to set free some of your slaves.

His second bit of bad news: if you don't set free the people of Israel, the Nile river will be turned to blood; the fish will die, it will stink, and you won't be able to use your primary water supply.

And so on it went for ten plagues.

Talk about stress! The President of the United States has a much less stressful job than Moses did.

Did the stress end when the people left Egypt?

No.

The people were chased, and only escaped by a miracle.

The people complained and Moses got scared of them.

God placed even more demands on Moses. Moses was to lead the people, punish the people, set down laws for the people.

The only thing that made it possible was that God was with him.

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But even on his deathbed, Moses knew that God was with him. He said, "God sustained his people in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded them, cared for them, guarded them as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the LORD alone guided them; no foreign god was with him. He set them atop the heights of the land, and fed them with produce of the field; he nursed them with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock; curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs and rams; Bashan bulls and goats, together with the choicest wheat-- you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes." Deuteronomy 32:10-14, NRSV.

What God promised to Moses at the very beginning, from the burning bush, stayed true: "I will be with you."

That is the promise that Christians need to be reminded of. God will be with us. Through the trials of sickness, dying and death, God will be with us. Through the times of scarcity and in times of plenty, God will sustain us. Through our travels, and while at home, God will be with us. When we seek for guidance, and even when we stubbornly try to do it our own way, God will be with us.

You may be tempted not to believe it.

You may be tempted to try to do it on your own.

You may be tempted by other values that the ones contained in the ten commandments.

These were all temptations that the ancient Israelites faced under Moses' leadership.

Still God was with them. God is with us.

And it is enough. It was enough for Moses despite many hardships. It was enough for those who followed Jesus. Jesus was with them. It was OK, even when it wasn't OK.

God is with us.

There's the story that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, on his deathbed said, "The best of all is, God is with us."

Knowing that God is with us gives us the confidence to live in faith, to live abundant lives. Thanks be to God.

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3 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. **3** So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." **6** Then he said, "I am the God of your father, [a] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8** So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **9** And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

12 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you [b] will worship God on this mountain."
(Exodus 3:1-12, NIV)

3 One day, Moses was taking care of the sheep and goats of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, and Moses decided to lead them across the desert to Sinai, [a] the holy mountain. **2** There an angel of the Lord appeared to him from a burning bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire, but it was not burning up. **3** "This is strange!" he said to himself. "I'll go over and see why the bush isn't burning up."

4 When the Lord saw Moses coming near the bush, he called him by name, and Moses answered, "Here I am."

5 God replied, "Don't come any closer. Take off your sandals—the ground where you are standing is holy. **6** I am the God who was worshiped by your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Moses was afraid to look at God, and so he hid his face.

7 The Lord said:

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I have seen how my people are suffering as slaves in Egypt, and I have heard them beg for my help because of the way they are being mistreated. I feel sorry for them, 8 and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians.

I will bring my people out of Egypt into a country where there is good land, rich with milk and honey. I will give them the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. 9 My people have begged for my help, and I have seen how cruel the Egyptians are to them. 10 Now go to the king! I am sending you to lead my people out of his country.

11 But Moses said, "Who am I to go to the king and lead your people out of Egypt?"

12 God replied, "I will be with you. And you will know that I am the one who sent you, when you worship me on this mountain after you have led my people out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:1-12, CEV)

48 Later that day the Lord said to Moses:

49 Go up into the Abarim Mountain range here in Moab across the Jordan River valley from Jericho. And when you reach the top of Mount Nebo, you will be able to see the land of Canaan, which I am giving to Israel. 50 Then you will die and be buried on the mountaintop, just as your brother Aaron died and was buried on Mount Hor. 51 Both of you were unfaithful to me at Meribah Spring near Kadesh in the Zin Desert.[a] I am God, but there in front of the Israelites, you did not treat me with the honor and respect I deserve. 52 So I will give the land to the people of Israel, but you will only get to see it from a distance. (Deuteronomy 32:48-52, CEV)

48 On that same day the Lord told Moses, 49 "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. 50 There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. 51 This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. 52 Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel." (Deuteronomy 32:48-52, NIV)