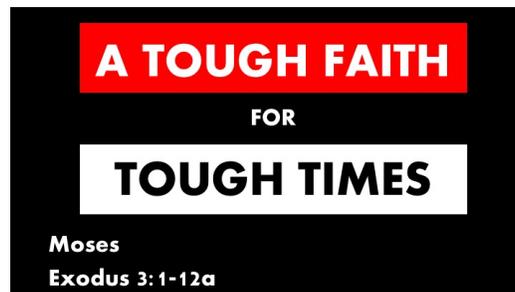


November 1, 2020
Exodus 3:1-12a



This morning, I continue the series of messages I began last week, titled *A Tough Faith for Tough Times*. In this series, we are studying various Biblical characters – Joseph, Moses, David, Job, Peter, and Paul – and the challenges they were able to overcome through the strength of their faith. Today, we will take a look at the life of Moses.

The story of Moses is quite epic in its scale, comprising all but the first chapter of the book of Exodus and continuing through the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Like the story of Joseph, the length of the story allows for a myriad of plot twists and turns.

As difficult as it was to condense the story of Joseph into such a brief amount of time, it is even more difficult to do so with the story of Moses.

I imagine we have all seen at least one film adaptation of Moses. For anyone of my generation, or older, the Cecil B. DeMille version, starring Charlton Heston, has been the definitive version of the Hollywood treatments of the life of Moses. Whatever cinematic version of the life of Moses you have seen, put it out of your head this morning. I know it's hard to do so, but film and TV depictions of the story of Moses – and pretty much any Biblical story made into a film – are not entirely accurate in what they portray. So as interesting as it is to watch a cinematic version of any Biblical story, remember that there is quite a bit of “artistic license,” that is inherent in those productions.

As I thought about a Scripture text for this morning, my first choice was the one I will read in a few moments. As the week progressed, I changed my choice a number of times, before ending up where I started.

There are so many passages that would be great to use for this message, but I have chosen the story of when Moses approaches the burning bush, as he is watching his father-in-law's flock. It is one of the most well-known parts of the story of Moses, and I invite you to follow along as I read Exodus 3:1-12a –

¹Now 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.

²There 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.

³So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴When 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.”

⁶Then he said, “I am the God of your father¹ 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.

⁷The 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.

⁸So 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.

⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

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

¹²And God said, “I will be with you.

As I did last week, this morning I will give a brief synopsis of the story of Moses and then draw some lessons from his experiences. As the story begins, Exodus tells us that Joseph and his family have passed away, and a king arises in Egypt who does not know of Joseph and his deeds. As the Hebrew people have grown very numerous, this king begins to fear the possibility that if war came to Egypt, the Hebrews would take the sides of Egypt's enemies. Fearing this possibility, the king made the Hebrew people slaves, forcing them to build cities for the Egyptians.

In one of the most famous elements of the story of Moses, chapter 2 tells us of his birth, and how his mother placed him in a basket, and then placed the basket in the Nile River, in order to protect him from the command of Pharaoh that all male Hebrew babies be put to death. The daughter of Pharaoh rescues Moses from the river and, feeling sorry for the child, sent for one of the Hebrew women to take care of him. It was the sister of Moses, who watched from a distance, who made the suggestion to solicit the help of one of the Hebrews, which turned out to be the mother of Moses as the one chosen to care for him (2:1-10).

Moses grew up in the household of Pharaoh, with all the privilege that came with his position. One day, while watching the Hebrews working, he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrews. Moses killed the Egyptian and fled to Midian after learning that his act had been discovered (2:11-25).

After arriving in Midian, Moses marries Zipporah and begins to care for the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. One day, while watching the flock, Moses encounters God in the burning bush, and God calls upon Moses to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt (3:1- 4:17).

Going to Pharaoh, Moses pronounces that Egypt will suffer ten plagues unless the Hebrew people are set free (4:18- 11:10).

After allowing the Hebrews to leave Egypt, Pharaoh changes his mind and his army pursues them into the wilderness, to the edge of the Red Sea (13:5-31). You might be surprised that the actual story of the parting of the sea is not quite the way it has been portrayed in movies. If you have seen the Charlton Heston movie, *The Ten Commandments*, you will no

doubt remember the very dramatic way that the parting of the Red Sea is portrayed. What you might not know is that the movie version is not at all the way it takes place in the Bible. Exodus 14:21-22 gives a very different version from that of Hollywood – ²¹ *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,* ²² *and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.* The Red Sea did not part immediately, but over the course of the nighttime hours.

The Passover is instituted (12:1-30).

The people begin their generation-long wandering in the wilderness (15:22 – through the end of Exodus and into the book of Joshua).

Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God (Exodus 20:1–17).

Moses receives the Law (20:22 – 24:18).

The Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant are constructed (25:1 – 30:38; 35:4 – 40:38).

Aaron leads the people to construct the golden calf while Moses is on the mountain (32:1-35).

The books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy tell of the more detailed aspects of the Law, the Tabernacle, the various religious feasts, the tribes, the passing of leadership from Moses to Joshua, and, finally, the death of Moses.

As I have very briefly mentioned the highlights of the life of Moses, I hope you will take some time in the coming days and read through the complete story, as it really is such an amazing story.

1. Our Plan Might Not Be God's Plan/We Don't Always Know What's Good for Us.

Moses was living in self-imposed exile, in Midian, assuming he would live out the rest of his days there. It must have been tough for him, as he had been a prince of Egypt, with all the privilege that came with such a position. And then, he is in Midian, watching a flock of sheep, far removed from the halls of power, wealth, and privilege. I'm not dishonoring the new vocation of Moses, but it wasn't the same as where

he had been. It is then that God, surprisingly, selects Moses for a great plan.

It's hard for us to know what God's plan is. We just don't see it when we're in the middle of events. Moses no doubt assumed that his life was now confined to Midian and he would spend the remainder of his life tending sheep. There was nothing in Moses's understanding that could prepare him for what God was about to do through his life. The great Biblical characters, such as Moses, are not able to see God's plan while they are in the middle of the events that they experience.

We don't always know – in fact, we generally do not know – what God's plan is as we are moving through our lives. We are going about our lives, going about our business, and we do not see the overall plan that God has for us. How often, as we try to discern God's plan for us, do we want to say, *Lord, can you give me a few more details here? Can you help me to more clearly see what it is that you want me to do? Can you make your plan just a bit more obvious? Please?*

There is always a plan at work, even if we cannot see that plan. And we can add that not only do we not always see the plan; we don't even know what's best for us. Every time things become difficult for the Hebrew people, as they wander through the wilderness, the people approach Moses and Aaron with the complaint that *you brought us out into the wilderness to die*. As an example, here is what Exodus 14:10-12 tells us – *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, "Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians"? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"* I find it interesting that the people told Moses they didn't want to leave Egypt; I think the people were actually very happy to get out of Egypt. How quickly the people forgot about how difficult their lives were in Egypt! When life became difficult, they decided they would have been better off to remain in Egypt, where they were in bondage. They could not see what was best for them.

There are numerous times in the Moses story that he hears this basic complaint from the people, and then Moses turns around and complains to God about having to deal with such a difficult group of people. Sometimes, even God complains about the people. When Moses is on the mountain, receiving the Law, and the people convince Aaron to make the golden calf, God tells Moses to *go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt* (Exodus 32:32). Suddenly, they are Moses's people!

But Moses did not always know what was best for him either. When God appeared to Moses through the burning bush, calling him to lead the people out of Egypt, Moses offered a litany of excuses, such as the fact that he was not well spoken, and may have had a speech impediment. *Moses said to the Lord, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue* (4:10). Moses thought he knew what was best for himself, but he didn't.

When we don't know what's best for us, we question what God is doing, or, perhaps, not doing. We are confused by the events in which we find ourselves. Now, I'm not saying that everything that happens in life is a direct result of God's actions. Some of what happens in our lives and in the world are consequences and repercussions of human behavior and human decisions. But in spite of our questions, in spite of our uncertainty, God always has a plan, and God is always working that plan, even when we don't see it.

If we aren't challenged, we generally don't rise to the occasion. What do we see in times of difficulty? We see the good and bad. The pandemic has brought out some of both, but we have seen a lot of the good, and it appeals to us in a very deep and moving way.

Sometimes, we need a challenge if we are going to be the people God has called us to be. We might kick and scream all the way there, but when we get there, we understand how much we needed the challenge and how that challenge will shape us to be the people God desires us to be.

2. Our Low Point May Be a Beginning Point.

When Moses is on the run to Midian because Pharaoh wants to kill him, he no doubt thinks about all he has lost. The person in whose household Moses grew up now wants to take his life. His power, wealth, and privilege are gone. How much lower could life become for Moses? It wasn't, however, as much a low point in life as it was the beginning of a new life for Moses.

I believe that a mistake often made is quitting too soon. It appears that we are at a low point, a point of failure, and we believe it's time to give up. Maybe it is, but I believe that much of the time our low point may be a beginning point for a new life, as it was for Moses. Or Joseph. Or Abraham. Or David. Or Peter. Or Paul. What if they had quit when they reached their lowest point? Their low points in life were the beginning of a new mission for each of them.

When you feel as though your life has reached the bottom, when it seems as though your life cannot get any worse, that might be the moment when God is leading you in a new direction, when God is preparing you for a new mission, and when God is beginning to work a new plan in your life. Don't quit! Don't give up!

3. See the Humanity in Others

I am going to back up in the story Moses to near the beginning, when Moses killed the Egyptian who was beating one of the Hebrew slaves. As Moses grew up in the household of Pharaoh, he did not know his real identity. Moses did not know he was one of the Hebrews, but at some point, he discovers his true identity. Once Moses discovered he was a Hebrew, he took a much greater interest in their plight, so on the day he witnessed an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves, he killed the Egyptian. Here's something I've wondered for a long time. Before Moses learned that he was one of the Hebrews, did he ever express any concern over their plight? Was he at all concerned about the harsh reality that they were slaves? My point is not to paint Moses in an unflattering light, but simply to ask the question, was Moses concerned about the Hebrews before he discovered he was one of them? Did he ever notice their suffering? Did he ever consider the absolute injustice of enslaving

people? We don't know. We don't know that he thought much of anything about them, other than knowing they built the buildings they were told to build and doing they work they were told to do. We do know, however, that Moses became interested in the Hebrew people after he discovered he was one of them. At that point, Moses understood that something needed to be done about their suffering. Where was that concern prior to discovering his identity as a Hebrew?

One of the truths we must confront in our historical moment, especially as so many have greatly suffered economically, is the growing divide between the "haves" and the "have nots." There is such a divide now between those two groups and, unfortunately, there is also a growing separation between them where it is possible to be completely insulated from a personal awareness of the suffering of others. Tanya and I recently visited an area that was a perfect illustration of this dynamic. We went to a planned community, which is very new, and it is a beautiful area. The buildings were all new and beautifully designed. The downtown area looked like the perfect idealization of small-town America, almost Disneyesque in its appearance. The homes were beautiful, the storefronts attractive, and the restaurants plentiful and bustling with patrons. It seemed perfect in every way. In fact, it was a bit too perfect, as it was a bubble, an island in the midst of a very drastically changing landscape. It was far removed from the city center of the local population. It was priced, presumably, out of range of many, so there would be no social blight possible in this area. As beautiful as it appeared, it is not real. It is an artificially created community that allows people to shield themselves from the harsh realities of our time and reinforces an "out of sight, out of mind" way of thinking and living that removes people from seeing the harsher realities of the world. One could live in that fully contained community and not have to travel outside of its boundaries and be confronted with the harsh realities faced by so many, and then be poorer because of that insulated way of life. We don't like to be reminded of how harsh this world can be. We easily fall prey to a desire to insulate ourselves from reality, and when we do, others are worse off because of it, and we are as well.

Moses lived in an insular bubble as a part of Pharaoh's household, far removed from the suffering of the Hebrew people. But when he discovered he was one of the Hebrews, then he became concerned about their welfare.

We must see the humanity of people – all people – and especially the humanity of those who suffer. One of the great sadnesses of our day, along with the gulf that exists between people, is the way in which we make caricatures and stereotypes of others. It happens not just with the “haves” and the “have nots;” it also happens with Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, it's the religious and the non-religious and the different groups within those who are religious. One group sees the members of another group as nothing but a stereotype and fails to see their humanity, and when we fail to see the humanity of others and the image of God in others it can give us license to do what we want to others and to treat others in whatever way we choose. That's why the Egyptians could enslave the Hebrew people, and that's why so many other powers have enslaved people, not only in ancient times, but all through history and into our own time. How is it possible that slavery – such a terrible stain on humanity – continues to exist? How is it possible that anyone could have the arrogance and audacity to believe they have the right to own another human being as though they are nothing but a piece of property to be used however they so desire? It is because we fail to see the humanity in others, which gives us a license to do what we want to do to others, including making them slaves, even down to our own historical moment.

Slavery is the worst case scenario, but there are other ways that we see the damage as well. When we stereotype people, when we turn others into nothing more than a caricature, when we see them as nothing more than the “other,” we fail to see their humanity. We see that attitude tearing our social fabric to shreds these days. One of the truths of the pandemic is this – we have seen some of the best of humanity. We have seen the medical personnel who have not only risked their own lives to help others, some of them have given their lives in caring for others. We have also,

unfortunately, seen some of the worst. We have seen those who have no compassion for the suffering of others.

Moses saw the humanity of the Hebrew people, thankfully, but it took him a while to get there.

And lastly, here is what God tells Moses at the burning bush, in the last verse of this morning's Scripture text –

4. And God said, "I will be with you.

Five simple words. In fact, say that with me. *I will be with you. I will be with you. I will be with you.* I wonder how many times Moses repeated that phrase to himself, as he stood before Pharaoh, the one who wanted to kill him, and said, *you're going to let my people go. The people who, as slaves, form the backbone of your economy, and we are going to leave here with our freedom,* Moses remembered, *I will be with you.* As he stood between the army of Pharaoh and the Red Sea, Moses remembered, *I will be with you.* As he came down from the mountain and saw Aaron and the people worshipping the golden calf; Moses remembered, *I will be with you.* As he grew weary of the difficulties and the stresses of leading the people through the wilderness, Moses remembered, *I will be with you.*

How often do we need to repeat those words, in these difficult times? *I will be with you.* As we ask ourselves if our job will remain secure. *I will be with you.* Or, for those who have lost a job, will they find new employment? *I will be with you.* It doesn't mean life will be easy. In fact, Moses might say, don't forget to say, *yes, God was with us, but it was not easy.* God did not make life easier, but he gave Moses and the people the strength they needed to get through the challenges they faced. And God promises to do the same for us.

We prefer the other. We prefer to have life made easier. I don't know why life doesn't work that way, but it doesn't. It seems that God, in his infinite wisdom, has decided not to make life easier but to give us the strength to get through out difficult times. So as you go through the rest of this day, the rest of this week, the rest of this month, and the remainder of this time of pandemic – however long that might be – remember those five words God spoke to Moses. Moses stood before a burning bush,

while we seem to be standing before a world that is burning down, but the promise is the same – *I will be with you.*

Amen, and amen.