

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we continue our series on “Moses and the Israelites.” On these three Sundays, we hear some of the most important stories of the Hebrew Scriptures so that we might best understand our God. So, let’s dive in.

If you couldn’t make it last week, we heard how the Egyptian ruler, Pharaoh, tried to crackdown on the growing minority population. However, ordinary people, midwives and even Pharaoh’s daughter, got in the way of this tyranny and allowed an Israelite infant, named Moses, to live. In between last week’s story and today’s story, Moses grew up and got in trouble. Here’s what happened: Moses witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew person, one of his blood relatives. Moses quickly looked around, didn’t see anyone, and so he killed the Egyptian. Well, it turned out that some Israelites saw the murder and word got out. When Pharaoh found out what Moses had done, he was angry and wanted to kill Moses. So, Moses fled to Midian, where he eventually got married and had a child.

Alright, that completes our “previously on Moses and the Israelites” segment. Today, we heard that Moses was herding sheep. Then, he noticed a bush on fire, but something was not right. That is, the bush wasn’t burning up. Weird. Moses looked away, maybe to put on his left-over eclipse glasses, and then he heard his name. Moses learned that God was speaking, and God had seen the suffering and oppression of the Hebrew people. God was morally outraged by what was going on in Egypt. As such, God decided to liberate the Hebrew people and give them a land that was prosperous and abundant.

Up to this point, there was nothing to get too anxious about, but then God threw a curve ball. This liberation was not going to come from some random objective, cataclysmic event – say, an earthquake, hurricane, or flood. God was not going to wiggle her nose, or snap his fingers, or pull a rabbit out of a hat. No. Instead, God wanted to use humankind. It was a risky choice. After all, humans are imperfect, flaky, resistant, and emotional. We say we are for one thing and our actions prove to communicate something entirely different. We are inconsistent, unreliable, and far too difficult to control.

Anyway, God said, “So, Moses, you – you are going to bring the Israelites out from Egypt.” Moses does a double-take and said, “Wait, what? Who me? You know, God, I’m not the right person. Remember, I have a Hebrew birth mother *and* an Egyptian adoptive mother. On top of that, I’m here in Midian because I’m a murderer. Sure, I work hard with these sheep, but I’m nothing more than a powerless minority and a foreign immigrant.” God reassured Moses and says, “Dude, Moses, I’ll be with you.”

Moses paused, thought for a moment, and asked God to share God’s name. This might seem like an odd request. Yet, a name defines an individual. This might be difficult for us to understand because in our culture we often choose a child’s name before we know their personality. But, in Moses’s culture, a name was given to describe the individual. For example, last week we learned that the name “Moses” means “to pull out or draw out,” and Moses got this name after he was drawn out of the water by Pharaoh’s daughter. So, when Moses asks for God’s name, his request is to understand the character of God. He wants to know: “How God operates in the world?” While God does give Moses a response, it’s a bit cryptic. God said, “I am who I am,” or alternatively we could translate it from the original Hebrew as “I will be what I will be.”

Here's the thing, God's name is important. This name of God – "I am who I am" – will be used throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. So too in our newest icon, the Greek letters in Christ's halo are that divine name. With that phrase, "I am who I am," we know the identity and the function of God. Much like other names for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, for example Yahweh or YHWH or when you read the word "LORD" in all caps, all of these names of God are rooted in a form of the verb "to be." You see, our God is not a noun, rather our God is a verb. We remember from grammar school that verbs describe an action, condition, or experience. With God's name, we come to discover that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is the creator God who is active against injustice and revealed in an intimate name-giving relationship. This is the same God who, in Exodus 29, reminded the Israelites that they were liberated so God could dwell among them. And, this is the same God who, in Exodus 34, defined God's own character as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."

But it doesn't end in Hebrew Scriptures, for this same dynamic God is revealed through Jesus who reminded us that to find our life we must lose it. And isn't that the essence of working against injustice like Moses? Think about it, if we work to dismantle racism, each one of us white people will lose our privileged life. If we work to feed the hungry and cloth the naked, we will have to confront our disposable and consumeristic way of life. If we welcome the stranger as seen in immigrants and refugees, we will need to shift our nationalistic values to compassionate values. You see, to respond to injustice like our God means that everything will actively change – the very life we know will be dramatically different. And that is the reason why humans are the worst choice for God's redemptive work. Change is hard. It's why Moses resisted. It's a lot of work. It's painful. It's messy.

But, God has been active in the mess from the beginning. God empowered the midwives to resist the power-hungry Pharaoh, and now God pushed a fugitive and a murder to lead the Israelites from Egypt. This is the real deal. This is life and death. This is persecution and prosperity. This is our world.

And into that messy world, God chooses people like you and me to be the hands and feet of God. Remember, in Moses's encounter, there is seemingly no functional difference between God and God's agents. Or, using Dr. Amy Willis' words, in this story and every other commissioning scene, God's work is aligned and intertwined with human agency.¹ You see, time and again, God's work is confusing, unclear, and entangled with humanity.

But, here's the thing, the key to survival, the key to thriving, and, in fact, the key to transformation is found within this story. The key to making it through the floods of Hurricane Harvey, the key to making it through a difficult relationship, and the key to wading through the crap of life, is in the Exodus story. For we survive, we thrive, and we are transformed when we center our lives around the foundational story of our God who is merciful, who liberates us from injustice, and who prioritizes relationality. You see when the rains come down and the floods come up, we remember that our God is active through compassionate first responders and donors. When a relationship is troubled and the future looks bleak, the vulnerable relationships we have with people of faith remind us that we are loved and God is present. When everything seems to be turned upside-down, we are reminded that in every generation God hears our cries and actively responds through you and me.

As we wrap up our time together, I pray that you hold on to this central story. Remember that our God's identity is rooted in a verb. Be reminded that you and I, in all of our beautiful

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=973

messiness, are called to work for justice, peace, and love. And know that the same promise given to Moses is for all generations – a promise that God *will* be with you. Amen.