

God and Moses

September 3, 2023.

Our reading from the book of Exodus today is a very special part of Scripture. It is sometimes called “the revelation of revelations.” What is portrayed here is in some ways the very heart of the Jewish and Christian faith. We should pay special attention to this.

It begins with Moses looking after his father-in-law’s sheep. Who is Moses? Well, he’s a killer. According to the book of Exodus, Moses was raised in Egypt by Pharaoh’s daughter. He must have maintained some connection to his people the Hebrews though, because as a young man, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he intervened and killed the Egyptian. He tried to cover this up but it didn’t work. Realizing his own life was in danger because of what he had done, he fled Egypt, found his way to Midian, got married and started a new life. Here we find him. Moses is not an ideal moral hero. He has some baggage. Don’t we all? We see in this passage that this doesn’t stop God. There is a place for us all in God’s work, regardless of who we are or what we’ve done.

Moses sees a bush that is burning, yet it is not consumed. He turns aside to look at this more closely. Why? He’s curious. He’s looking for something. According to Augustine, we all are. Augustine wrote his book *Confessions* as a prayer to God. Near the start of it he wrote: “Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in you.” We’re all looking for something. Sometimes we’re looking in the wrong way, in the wrong places, for the wrong things. Still, whether we realize it or not, we’re all looking for God.

Now here is something. God is also looking for us. The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin in Luke 15 express this clearly (Luke 15:1-10). God is seeking us. God’s great love cannot be satisfied until we are all found. Moses is a person with some baggage. He’s also a person who is loved by God. God is looking for him. Yet there is still more to Moses than this.

Moses turns aside to see the burning bush. Then God speaks to him, and Moses hides his face. Moses is looking for God. We all are, each in our own way. Yet while Moses is looking for God, he also has what we can call “a will to a distant God.” On the one hand, he is seeking God. But there is also something in him that doesn’t want God too close. “You park yourself over there God. Keep the earth turning, the economy going, and now for a real miracle, keep those Riders in the win column. But don’t get too close. Be there, but let me do my own thing.” Moses wants a distant God. Most of us do to some extent.

Moses has taken his shoes off. He’s hiding his face. He would like to hide his whole self, or be somewhere else. But there is no place we can go where we can get away from God. Our will to a distant God always collides with God’s love for us. Don’t worry. As in those parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, in the end, God’s love will always find us. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Back to our passage from Exodus. Now God speaks again:

I have observed the misery of my people I have heard their cry I know their sufferings I have come down to deliver them.

This is who God is. This is the basic nature of God. These lines reveal to us that God is love, that God’s love is active in the world, that God listens to us, listens to all of

creation, and acts to save us. This message that God is love is fundamental to Scripture. Without this, there would be no Bible. For Christians God's love is revealed most fully and powerfully in Jesus Christ. But in essence, it is revealed right here in this passage.

Then God says to Moses: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses has some baggage. Still he is loved by God. And now, he is called by God, to participate in God's saving work. That's who Moses is. That's also who we all are. We all are called to participate in what God is doing. The great philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote that people addressed by God, that's you and me, are both fragile and capable. We are also diverse, but Ricoeur didn't get that far. If he had the privilege of coming to McClure for a few Sundays, Debra would have got that through to him. However, back to our passage.

God knows that Moses is fragile. That's why God starts slow, with the burning bush. God also knows that Moses is capable. That's why God ends up saying, "Moses, I will send you." Here God knows more about Moses than Moses does himself. We are all fragile. We are easily injured or hurt. We often go wrong. We're also all capable, each in our own way. Regardless of our fragility, there is a place for what each of us can do in what God is about.

God calls Moses to play a part in what God is going to do. How does Moses answer God? Moses says: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh ...?" In other words, "No, I won't do it." I am told that all through the Hebrew Bible, every time God calls someone to do something, almost everyone answers this way. Apparently there is only one exception: the prophet Isaiah. When God said, "who shall I send," Isaiah spoke up, "Here I am, send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). He may be the only one to have said yes right away. Most of us answer like Moses. Moses is seeking God, but he also has this will to a distant God. He's a complex character. Most of us are. The will to a distant God tends to run deep in us. But God's love runs deeper. It will find a way to open our hearts; to our neighbours, to ourselves, and to God.

Now we have a bit of a contest going on between God and Moses. God has called Moses. Moses doesn't want to go. As they circle each other, Moses has a clever thought. As many of you may know, in the ancient Middle East, there was a tradition that to know the name of a person or a god was to have power over them. Moses will get God to reveal God's name. Then God will be at Moses' command. What a great idea. However, I'm told that there is a musical in the United States, based on the gospel of Matthew. The title of the musical comes from a saying in the Black church. The title, the saying, is: your arms are too short to box with God. Moses is about to learn that.

Moses says to God, well, if I go to the Israelites to lead them to freedom, they will want to know your name. What should I tell them? God said to Moses: "I am who I am." This is the name of God that gets revealed here. It can also be translated as "I will be who I will be," or "I am what I am." This is the famous divine name. Philosophers and theologians have written lots about this. We could spend a lot of time delving into that, but instead, we'll cut to the chase. This is what this divine name means: if God says "I am going to be the God who delivers Israel from slavery," than that is who God will be. In other words, if God says something is going to happen, it will.

I find great comfort and hope in this. First we learn that God is love. Then we learn that ultimately, come what may, in the end, God will deliver. When I look at the

world, or at myself, and see all that needs doing, all that cries out for action, I'm often overwhelmed. So it is a great comfort and source of hope to learn that God is not overwhelmed by the world, and that God is able to deliver God's people. Its not all on our shoulders. Its not all up to us. God is the one who is going to deliver Israel, and all of us. There are parts for you and me to play in this. But in the end, this passage says, our hope doesn't lie in ourselves. It lies with God. I may be overwhelmed by the world, but God isn't.

If we read on into Exodus chapter 4, Moses has a few more objections to make. Yet when all is said and done, he and his family load up their donkey and head off to Egypt. After a lot of drama, they and the Israelites did head out for a promised land, where they could live in freedom. But the story didn't end there. In fact, it still goes on, all over the globe, and right here and now. God is not done. God is still God, and so the Exodus continues. Exodus is not just an ancient writing from the past. It's a call to us to play a part in shaping the future. It's an ongoing project that God calls us to participate in.

In some ways it's a very different project today. Knowing the history of residential schools, we can't read these verses about Israel taking over the land of the Canaanites, the Hitites, etc., without cringing. The Exodus continues today, but often in very different ways. Our church, ourselves, we all have some baggage. When we go wrong, we have to repent. That's not easy, but its part of the journey. The Exodus still continues. And we still have a part to play in it.

And the Exodus isn't just about social justice and peace. It is about that. Yet there is also a personal dimension to the Exodus. We each need to be freed and led out of our own personal captivities. The Exodus is about the society and the world we live in. Its about our church community. Its about ourselves and our personal struggles. And its not just a struggle and a task. Its also a celebration: a celebration of who God is, of God's great love, of who we are, and that God loves us and calls us, to play a part in what God is doing.

We started by wondering who Moses is. Along the way we found out who God is. It turns out that knowing who God is, is the key to knowing who Moses is. That's true for each one of us. If we want to know who we are, we should read this passage. It will tell us. We are all fragile. We are all capable. And we are each in our own way, called by God, to play a part in what God's love is doing; to participate in something much bigger than ourselves, the coming of God's reign. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Don Schweitzer