

“MOSES: II – THE RELUCTANT PROPHET”  
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Exodus 3:1-12

Mark 1:14-20

I don't know if you noticed, but this week, a little bit of American history passed away. The man who served in Congress for the longest time ever died this week. His name was John Dingell, Jr. and he represented Michigan in Congress from – get this! – 1955 until 2015! I watched some of his funeral on CSPAN the other night, and it was amazing, because people from both sides of the political aisle were there in force. There was no doubt that Dingell was a Democrat through and through, but he was more than that, and by the lineup of speakers, you knew that. Another of the Michigan legislators spoke first, then came the venerable Civil Rights leader and Congressman John Lewis of Georgia. I can't remember the exact order of speakers, but somewhere along the way Maryland's own Steny Hoyer spoke, and former Speaker of the House and Republican John Boehner spoke fondly of Dingell. Finally, former President Bill Clinton witnessed to Dingell's life and influence as well.

The men who spoke were from all ends of the political spectrum, and yet they had one thing in common – they admired, even loved, John Dingell, for who he was,

what he stood for, how he lived. Though clearly they hadn't agreed with every stance he took in that incredible span of years, underneath it all they admired his commitment to do what was right. They also admired something that he did so often that mostly now has gone by the wayside in Washington – he crossed the aisle and worked together with members of the other party. He was remembered as a man willing to make tough choices and stances, even if it would cost him votes – as it did in the area of civil rights in the 1960's.

John Dingell succeeded his father in Congress. In 1955, John Dingell, Sr. died, and John, Jr. succeeded him. He loved serving in Congress, and as more than one speaker noted the other night, for him, it wasn't a job, it was a calling. Something deep, something compelling, something from which you couldn't or wouldn't turn your back.

Callings – that clearly is the subject of both of our scripture lessons for today. In the Gospel lesson, we remembered Jesus calling his disciples from their work to do the work of the kingdom. But it's the calling in today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures upon which I want us to focus this morning – the calling on the life of a man by the name of Moses.

If you were here last week, you'll remember we heard Moses' birth story. Let's revisit it for just a minute again. Moses was born in a time of great peril for the Hebrew people. Pharaoh was feeling so threatened by the Israelites, that he called for all male Hebrew babies to be killed at birth – no questions asked.

Well, two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, disregarded that edict and saw to it that that didn't happen, sparing unknown numbers of Hebrew boys, including Moses. So Moses was lovingly cradled in the arms of his mother, until she knew she could no longer protect him from the evils of Pharaoh, whereupon she put him into a basket, set him on the waters and asked God to care for him.

Which God did, in a most unlikely way. Pharaoh's daughter was out for a walk on that very same day, and she saw that basket floating along with its precious cargo. Her heart felt pity for the little one, and she took him and made him her own.

Side note – remember that Moses' sister rose up and offered to find Pharaoh's daughter a woman to nurse Moses, an offer she gladly accepted, and the nurse she found was none other than Moses' mother herself. So, in the early years of his life,

not only was Moses living in the lap of Egyptian luxury, the son of a princess, he was also being loved, nurtured and taught, day by day, by his very own Hebrew mother.

And that's important to remember, because of what comes later on in his life, actually, forty years later. For forty years, Moses has been living it up in an Egyptian palace, being treated as a prince, getting all the benefits of being in Pharaoh's household.

Then, one day, he goes out and comes upon Israelites being worked incredibly hard in forced labor. He looks and sees one of the Egyptian taskmasters beating one of the Israelites, and compassion for that slave rose up in Moses, and Moses went at the Egyptian taskmaster, killing him in the process.

And just like that, in the blink of an eye, Moses' life of privilege and prestige was done. Having killed an Egyptian, he was now seen as a traitor and a threat to Pharaoh, so he had no choice but to flee Egypt and begin a new life in Midian.

Which is exactly what he did, and after a while, life took on a kind of normalcy there for Moses. He married, had children, made a living as a shepherd, and it is in that capacity that we find him when we meet up with him in today's lesson. Actually, forty years have passed since that violent incident in Egypt, so now Moses is eighty years old, settled into life such as it is. I suspect he might have accepted that life by then and was quite okay with it.

“Not so fast,” God seems to say, as he shows up in a burning bush to change Moses' life forever. You heard it read. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro on Mt. Horeb, probably just like every other day in his life – when, all of a sudden, he encounters the angel of the Lord in a flame of fire coming out of a bush. He's stunned, and further stunned when he realized the bush is burning but it's not being consumed, it's not burning away. “What in the world? . . .”

At that point, God knew he had Moses' attention, so he spoke to him, telling him to take off his sandals, which meant that he was standing on holy ground. So Moses knew quite well with whom it was he was speaking – God Himself!

God told Moses he'd been watching things. He'd been watching his people be brutalized by the Egyptians, and he'd had enough. He was going to deliver his people from their suffering, and "Oh, by the way, Moses, you're the one I'm going to use to do it!"

I'm surprised Moses didn't pass out when he heard those words. Instead, he talked back to God, beginning a litany of excuses why he couldn't do it. First, he went with humility. "Who am I, Lord, that I should do that?" God reassured him that he would be with him.

Not enough for Moses. So he tried something else. "Well, if I do this, who am I going to say sent me?" God answers that question too. "I am who I am." And that's where we ended our reading for today, but the conversation went on for a while longer.

Moses questioned what would happen if people didn't believe that God had sent him. This time God gave him a sort of object lesson, if you will. He told Moses to throw down his rod, which he did, whereupon the rod became a snake, and then just as quickly, he turned it back into a rod. Just to solidify his argument, God told

Moses to put his hand inside his cloak and when he drew it out it was covered with a terrible skin disease. But then God told him to put it back inside his cloak, and lo and behold, this time, when he drew it back out, it was clean again. Shouldn't that have been enough evidence for Moses to say "yes"?

Oh, but it wasn't. Still he persisted, and takes a new tack. "But God, I'm not a good speaker," which is a little odd, isn't it, since he's been speaking quite a lot, apparently pretty fluently, in putting forth his argument with the Almighty. Nevertheless, God has an answer for that as well. He said, "You've got Aaron, your brother. He can speak for you."

Well, it seems like, finally, the steam has been let out of Moses' arguments, and he just humbly asks God to please send someone else. Yet, God knew what he was doing. He was calling the perfect person to do what needed to be done. For here was a man who knew well the ways of the Egyptians, yet had been nurtured and taught by his Hebrew mother, a man who God knew was the right man for the job. In a wonderful sermon on this text, the Rev. Joanna Adams, writes about what happens next:

“Finally, Moses stops talking and starts moving. Finally, he pushes through the wall of his own self-doubt and sense of inadequacy. God knew Moses would be fine. The problem was Moses didn’t know it. God intended to give Moses everything he would need to fulfill his mission. The challenge was in helping Moses get to the place where he could trust God to work in, through, and around his human limitations.” (On-line, Joanna Adams, “Clarity About Your Calling,” 2/12/06)

It’s a fascinating story, isn’t it? When we think of the heroes of our faith, our forefathers and foremothers who helped to make us who we are, we tend to think of them as those who would stop at nothing for the cause of the Kingdom of God, right? And yet, here we see, one of our greatest heroes, struggling mightily with the call of God on his life.

Yet, truth be told, we get it, don’t we? He’s a hero in our eyes now, but he was just plain Moses back then, a human being like you or me, a human being afraid of answering God’s call on his life – perhaps like we have been when God called us.



Now, before you say anything, please don't think that God has never called you to something, because God calls all of us at one time or another in our lives. Sometimes the call is big – to do something beyond what we think we could possibly do, to go out on a limb and take risks, to get out of our comfort zones, but many times, probably more times, God calls us to other, smaller things.

Again, some words from Joanna Adams: “I believe that there is not a single person listening to whom God has not spoken, some way, somehow, about where God wants you to go, what God wants you to do in the next chapter of your life. How does God speak? Sometimes, God's voice is heard in the form of an “A” in your favorite course in college. Sometimes, God can speak through the “F” as well. Here's the deal (she continues): God has not left you alone to find your way. The question is whether or not you and I are listening to the ups and downs in our lives, listening to the people around us who believe in us, listening to the surprising developments that come, truly, out of nowhere.” (Adams, *ibid.*)

Yet, when we listen, and when we do hear God calling, I'm afraid that, too often, sadly, we are like Moses, coming up with excuses. “I don't have time God, I'm already stretched too thin.” “I can't do that God, it's too risky, it might cause me friends or my job or my standing in the community.” “I don't have the gifts you

think I have, God. Somebody else could do it better. Try someone else.” “Look God, I’m not one to rock the boat, please find somebody else.”

Oh, if we would only step out in faith and trust, and follow where God leads! Look at what happened when Moses said “yes.” He changed the course of the future. He was the one through whom God brought the Ten Commandments to his people. He was the one who led God’s people into freedom. He was a hero who helped the faith alive. And none of that would have happened had Moses not said “yes.”

Oh, dear friends, what we might be missing by saying “no” when God calls? God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he puts before us things he knows we can do, with his help. Oh, that we would trust him enough to, even if we’re afraid, “take up that cross of doubt and uncertainty and follow him.”

I want to close by telling you about some who did. I want to say a word on behalf of our church’s relatively young “Church and Society Committee.” Formed not even a year ago, they have taken on a daunting task. They help us as a church look at contentious issues. So far, they’ve led us in discussions on immigration and

human sexuality – issues on which people tend to have strong opinions. Issues which have been known to bring about nasty arguments and hateful actions.

In some ways, it would be easier to let those things lie and not talk about them, and sadly, some churches are doing just that – putting their heads in the sand and acting like they're not there. But our Church and Society Committee members have said yes to God's call on their lives to help lead us in these and other areas. It's not easy, believe me. There's a lot of stress involved, and many times, all of them may have doubted that they were up to the task. But they have said "yes" to God's call and God is giving them all they need to do their job, and for that, we should be grateful – I know God is. They have helped us have important conversations.

Finally, one small story of something that happened with me at a clergy gathering one day. We were getting ready for the closing prayer and gathering in a big circle, when a clergyperson walked near me who wasn't, shall I say, one of my favorite people. He was theologically on the opposite end of the spectrum from me (not that that's bad), but he got on my nerves a lot, and well, let's just say, wouldn't have been classified as my best friend. He never really talked to me, I actually always got the feeling he might have talked **about** me. Nonetheless, that day,

something happened, as we gathered to join hands for prayer. He walked near me, and I felt a strong sense (surely from the Holy Spirit) that I should take his hand, which I did. And then we bowed and prayed with the rest of the group. No big deal, right?

Not long after that I got an email from him, and in it he told me that he had been deeply moved when I grabbed his hand. He said in the email that he had always been afraid to approach me, that he thought I was one of the “big-wigs” in the conference and that he was nothing compared to me, and when I took his hand to pray, he was overwhelmed. For him, a huge barrier had come down, and God’s love had come flowing in.

Oh dear friends, when the Spirit nudges you, go with it. When you hear God calling, however and whenever, try not to come up with an endless list of excuses as Moses did, or reason your way out of it, or stubbornly think things will never change. Just say “Yes, God, yes. Use me. I trust you. I will take up this cross and follow you.”

May it be so.

Amen.

Amen.