

Pastor Letter: The Molding of God's Servant (2/12/23)

As I researched our scripture passages for this week, the thought of how God molded the spiritual leaders in our two Biblical texts. I also was reminded of how my own spiritual development was forged by Almighty God and a long list of disciples.

Our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy (second law) highlights one of the last sermons of Moses. We read about the first 40 years of Moses' life when he was retrieved from the Nile River in a tarred basket by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the royal palace in Egypt. Here he received the best Egyptian education money could purchase and learned how to rule a great nation. Once Moses learned of his true Hebrew heritage, he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. A fearful Moses left the royal life in Egypt and fled into the desert.

God led Moses into the home of Jethro, the priest of Midian, who taught this refugee the skills of a shepherd. Moses married one of Jethro's daughters and herded his flocks all around the area of Mount Sinai for the next 40 years. Moses encountered God on Mt. Sinai at the burning bush. God sent this wondering shepherd back to Egypt in order to confront Pharaoh about letting the Hebrew people return home.

Moses then led the Israelite nation to Mt. Sinai where they made a covenant with God. Moses led God's people to Israel, the Promised Land, but they refused to enter this land of milk and honey. Moses led the disobedient Hebrew people out into the wilderness for 40 years, until all but Caleb and Joshua (faithful spies) died.

Returning to Israel, Moses gives the Israelites one last set of instructions before they entered the Promised Land, "See, I have set before you today, life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today....then, you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess," (Deut. 30:15-16). But if they refused to obey God, then they will suffer the consequence, "But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess," (vv. 17-18.) Because Moses had once disobeyed God, he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Our New Testament lesson comes from the apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Saul was born a Roman citizen, a Hebrew, and a tent-maker by trade. Saul was raised in Tarsus, educated in Judaism at Antioch and Jerusalem, and served as a Pharisee. Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, when he encountered the risen Christ. Saul was baptized by Ananias into the Christian faith, his name was changed to Paul, and was brought back to Jerusalem by Barnabas. The Christians were afraid of Paul (new name) so Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch where he learned the tenets of the Christian faith for several years before becoming a missionary.

Paul had founded the Corinthian church during one of his missionary trips into Asia Minor several years earlier. Paul has written a letter to this congregation chastising his readers for internal quarreling, following human leaders instead of God, and failing to worship the one true God, "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh," (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Paul continues to teach them that they should worship God not the men who evangelized them, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth....For we (Paul and Apollos) are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building," (vv. 6-9).

Just as Moses and Paul were prepared by God for their leadership roles, I too was molded for my current role of minister, preacher, and pastor of this congregation.

When Debbie and I returned home from Germany, we started attending her Presbyterian Church in which we were married. Not long after we arrived, a new minister fresh out of seminary was hired. He began teaching a wide variety of Biblical, spiritual, and faith developing programs. Like a sponge, I soaked up all these new evangelical programs and slowly grew in my own faith journey.

I was working at the Quaker State Oil Refinery during the period of these church development programs. While at the refinery, I worked in the Dewaxing unit and the slab-wax packaging department. The dewaxing unit had 4 different positions: unit operator, unit helper, filter man, and refrigeration operator. I was trained as the unit helper and filter man. Several of us worked the same shift for several years. Our operator was involved in an auto accident and developed a brain tumor. As his helper, I noticed he was making some very strange adjustments to the unit. I quickly learned how to properly operate the unit, in order to save myself a great deal of work and many trips up and down the 5-story recovery tower. I also learned how the filters operated as the wax and oil were separated much like an ice cream freezer.

I had just started a 4-year Bethel Bible program at the church when Quaker State decided to shut down their facility. I made the decision to turn down transfers to other facilities and other refining companies in order to remain in the Bethel program. I was laid off 5 times in 2 years from other companies just so I could complete the program.

After returning to college, I received a degree as an analytical chemist and was hired by a Pennzoil Refinery. I became a supervisor over 5 other Chemists in our laboratory. Management knew I had worked in the dewaxing unit at Quaker State and asked if I could develop a process for dewaxing crude oil stocks in our lab. Using the knowledge, I had gleaned in the dewaxing process at Quaker State, I developed a method of dewaxing using a sintered metal filter, a solvent blend, a deep freeze, vacuum pump, and bench oven. This method was very useful when the refinery was being turned into a wax plant after we experienced a devastating fire. This method was taught to our main research lab when they sold and later closed our facility.

When the refinery was sold, I applied and was accepted at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. There, I encountered a long list of faithful individuals who helped to turn a chemist into a pastoral leader and deepen my spiritual formation. Mission trips to various countries helped to further the shaping of this humble leader and further develop my spiritual formation. I have been blessed to encounter dedicated Christians from all around the globe who have chosen to faithfully follow their Lord even at tremendous costs. They have bravely chosen life and service to Almighty God.

May you also choose a spiritual life, service to the Kingdom of God, and obedience to your risen Savior. May you be nurtured with solid spiritual food instead of mere milk and may God provide a long list of individuals who can mold you for leadership.

Pastor Larry