

DISCOVERING GOD, DISCOVERING YOURSELF

Exodus 3: 1-14; 20: 1-6; 34: 1-9; Numbers 14: 1-6, 10-14, 17-20

How do you find God? Who is the God you find? How much is the God you find and the God you believe in, also a mirror into your own heart?

These, my friends, are also the questions we ask of one of the greatest figures in the bible: Moses. And because Moses' own journey of discovery is part of scripture, it is also a journey we are all invited to undertake. And in order to outline this journey of discovery, I've selected several passages spanning the "books of Moses" as they are called, which tell his story and the story of the people of Israel. (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

Moses enters the story in the book of Exodus when he is born at a challenging time for his people. He is part of a people enslaved by an empire called Egypt. The people are strong even though they are treated harshly. As much as the Egyptians try to break their spirits and keep them down, the people keep rising up. As a final step, Pharaoh the king orders that all male infants born of the people must be slaughtered. This will surely break their spirits. But the midwives of the people refuse to comply and plans are made to save as many infants as possible. Moses is one of those infants saved. But in his case, he is saved because he is found hidden by no less than the daughter of the Pharaoh. When she sees him she falls in love with the child. She wants to keep him. And so she does. Moses is raised an Egyptian and learns all the ways of the Egyptians.

At the same time, Moses' sister has seen Pharaoh's daughter take baby Moses. She approaches the entourage and asks whether she can fetch a wet-nurse to feed and care for the baby on behalf of the princess. This is how Moses' own mother not only comes in to feed Moses. She also serves as a nanny and secretly teaches Moses his native language, traditions and faith. Imagine if indigenous children in residential schools would have had access to their mothers like this...

So Moses grows, becomes cultured and lives in two worlds. But one day he is forced to choose. He sees an Egyptian task-master abusing a Hebrew slave. A deep anger rises up in him and he attacks the task-master. Whether intentionally or not, he kills him and saves his fellow Hebrew. Now he's in trouble. If he's found out it will be game over. And so, Moses runs away. He goes a distance, into the territory known as Midian. There he meets his future wife and family. He joins the family business as a farmer and herder of sheep. Life is happy. His past is forgotten. Many years pass. But then, one day, what is suppressed and hidden in him can remain so no longer. He is awakened to his past, to his culture, his roots and the plight of his people. Listen:

Exodus 3. 1-14

"Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶The Lord said further, 'I am the God of your fathers and mothers... And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send 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?' ¹²God said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

¹³ But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is this God's name?" what shall I say to them?' ¹⁴God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' God said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"

"I am." In Hebrew there are four letters that spell "I am." With vowels added to the consonants, the name is pronounced "Yahweh." Because Hebrews reverence the name of God they refuse to speak it, but prefer to call God "Adonai" or "The Lord" in many of our translations, never "Yahweh." But who is "Yahweh?" At this point, Moses only knows God's name, making God particular, as one with whom Moses can engage. He knows nothing about God's nature.

Also, Yahweh has called Moses. Moses may have forgotten about his roots, But God has not forgotten him. God draws Moses out from deep within himself. His conscience and his sense of responsibility for his people, his identity... God comes to him and God awakens in him. His conscience will not let him rest... The burning bush is a sign that wakes Moses up, wakes him to God stirring within him.

And of course, the burning bush is the symbol of Presbyterianism, representing this sense of call. We are all called by God, and that is how we discover ourselves before God: as those who are called. We are called to a vocation of liberation of others and in that liberative vocation we may find our own inner liberation too. Moses must find himself by finding his people and his people's struggle to be free is his own struggle for freedom and wholeness too.

OK, so after long struggle and many trials, Moses returns to Egypt, and with his siblings Aaron and Miriam, manages to rouse the people to faith and hope in a God who has power to liberate them. They stand up to Pharaoh and they escape. Even after they are chased down, they still make it. Finally, after a long journey, they come to the mountain where Moses first got his call. As promised, God makes a covenant with the people and Moses is the broker. These are the words Moses hears, words that will be chiselled on tablets of stone. Listen:

Exodus 20. 1-6

"Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Now there is more to the "10 commandments" as they are called. But I stop here to highlight something about God's being as Moses has so far discovered God. God is severe. God's liberation and love are conditional. You obey me and I will liberate and bless you. I demand your loyalty and faithfulness. The deal is, you remain loyal and faithful to me and I will bless you. Fail to keep your side of the covenant and trouble will come upon you.

Ok, but what kind of love is that? Yes, God has awakened them, fed them internally with faith and hope, and saved them from slavery. Any relationship requires faithfulness. There is little room for compromise. But are there any humans who will not break down and fail no matter what promises they make?

So it is and so it happens. Moses goes up the mountain. The people are tired and scared. Moses is gone a long time. Is he dead? Has God abandoned them here in the middle of a

desert, at the base of a mountain? They have little food and water. Whatever faith and hope they had starts falling away. The people start agitating. Aaron doesn't know what to do. They challenge him to make a new God for them to pray to. Moses and his God have abandoned them. They need a new God to give them new faith and hope. They break the commandment regarding the making of idols. Oh no!

Moses eventually returns with the 10 commandments. And what does he see? The people have already taken up with another God. They have already broken a core commandment. Moses is livid. In his rage he flings the tablets of stone and they break apart... What can be done now?...

Even though the people have failed in their commitment to faithfulness, even though they have broken faith with God and with Moses, how can God and Moses give up on them? And so, Moses goes back up the mountain to chisel out the commandments once again... except, now the commandments spoken to Moses are different... Somehow, the people's humanity and brokenness must be considered in the wording of the commandments... liberation has to expand in the ways it is thought out... See if you notice what's different in this second rendition of the commandments:

Exodus 34. 1-9

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. 2Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain... 4So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. 5The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord.' 6The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
'The Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation.'

8And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped. 9He said, 'If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.'"

So what's different in this rendition? First of all, in the first account the threat of punishment came first and the promise of steadfast love came after. Now it's reversed. "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" comes first, and only after is there the threat of punishment.

But second, in addition to the promise of love coming first, there is also something totally new added to the promise of steadfast love: forgiveness. Forgiveness was never mentioned before because the people hadn't failed before. Now that they have failed, how can the relationship continue unless God and Moses somehow let their anger and disappointment go and forgive? Forgiveness must now become an essential part of the commandments.

Wow! Moses is discovering God as one whose love has to reach deep inside to be steadfast and committed because people will disappoint. They will mess up and let them down. Without forgiveness, there is no future. God already looks different because Moses' heart is expanding. Yahweh is not only expanding in steadfast love for the people, but forgiving love too.

OK, but when does forgiveness make a mockery of the threat that's still chiselled on the tablets? Will the threat ever come into action? How far do the people keep messing up before it's game over? The story continues. Listen:

Numbers 14. 1-6, 10-14, 17-20

"14Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' 4So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.'

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. 10But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. 11And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12I will strike them with

pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.'

13 But Moses said to the Lord, 'Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, 14and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people... 17therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, 18 "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation." 19Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.'

20 Then the Lord said, 'I do forgive, just as you have asked...'

Wow! Not only are the people forgiven for their disloyalty to God and Moses by making an idol. Now the people have even turned on God and Moses. Shouldn't this be the end? No. Somehow, as Moses finds it in himself to keep opening his heart even in the face of repeated disappointment and even in the face of all out animosity and rejection toward him, he searches his heart for God and discovers a God whose love has room enough even for such rejection. Can you believe it?

Moses discovers who "I am" is, who Yahweh is, who the Lord is, ever more deeply as his own heart grows and expands. The people will mess up under the strain and fear of liberation. Their enslavement is still in their bones and it will take a long time to be free of it. The trauma of slavery is intergenerational. Building relationships of trust are tough. God and Moses need to discover deeper reservoirs of love to journey with the peoples' trauma in need of healing. They have to absorb the rejection, animosity, mistrust and constant questioning... God is steadfast love, yes, what that means at the beginning of the journey compared to what it means in the latter part of the journey changes and grows considerably.

So what does that mean for you and me here today, thousands of years later? First of all, this reveals to us that taking one passage of scripture and building a whole picture of God on it is highly flawed. You have to read the whole story and you have to notice how it evolves and changes. Moses hardly knows God. But he only gets to know God as he gets to know himself. As he grows in his commitment to love his people he discovers a God who is in that love. The two go together. We can never discover a God of love if we have hate in

our own hearts. As we grow in love we discover how much God is real as love. You see how it goes?

People may inspire us but they will also disappoint us. People may provoke us, but we may find within us a capacity for compassion and understanding because we recognize our own imperfect humanity. The danger is not in being too soft or easy with people's mistakes. The danger is in hardening our hearts and shutting off our spirits to a greater call of love, especially when there is suffering and brokenness...

Moses discovers capacities in himself that he never knew were possible. He discovers how steadfast and gracious God's love is. How about you and me? Have we discovered ever greater depths of love in our hearts as we have journeyed in relation to God above and within?

We live in challenging times, polarized times, conflicted times... We encounter people who have been traumatized and sometimes they accuse us of being part of a system, a nation and a people who have contributed to that trauma. How must our capacity for love grow so that our love is steadfast? How committed are we to being the hands, feet and heart of Jesus who reveals to us the true being of God? How much do we recognize that failure is part of our lives as much as we project it onto others? And how much are we prepared to connect to a God whose forgiving love toward us keeps calling us to go further and deeper in our capacity for inclusion toward others?

Prayer: Come to us, O God... May we hear your call as Moses did? May we trust and not be afraid. May we go where we have never gone before. And may we discover that even when we fail and fall, your love is deep enough and wide enough to embrace us, so that we can get up again and open our hearts to embrace others... Amen.