

Moses

There may be no more poignant picture in scripture than the last days of Moses, the hero of God who had led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to Sinai's peak where he delivered the Ten Commandments. God had led them through 40 years of wilderness to the Promised Land. Now God led Moses up Mt. Nebo so he could see it all before him. But for reasons we cannot fully understand God would not let Moses enter it. A younger leader, Joshua, would lead them in.

120 years old with a lump in his throat as big as Texas, he thought back over his long turbulent, miraculous, God-driven life.

I Prelude

The story of Moses began while Moses was still in his mother's womb. A new king arose in Egypt "who knew not Joseph," and his saving actions. The Hebrew people had been turned into slaves. Paranoid about the growing ranks of Hebrews, afraid of a revolt, he ordered the midwives of Egypt to strangle all Hebrew baby boys at birth. But scripture says, "The midwives feared God and did not as the king of Egypt commanded." We know the names of two, Shiphrah and Puah. When called in and interrogated for their secret acts of civil disobedience, they said, "These Hebrew women are strong and deliver their babies so fast that they are born before we get there!" They just zip out. Here's the stirring truth: *the obedience of a nurse-midwife is greater than all the pharaohs of the world.*

Who would you name as Shiphrah and Puah figures? Harriet Tubman, a freed slave who helped deliver slaves along the underground railroad and who was herself called “Moses.” Rosa Parks who sat in white people’s seat on the bus and started the civil rights strike, she sitting down so her people could stand up. Fannie Lou Hamer, civil rights leader. Malala the young Muslim girl who at age 14 defied the Taliban, was shot in the head but survived and soon after won a Nobel Peace Prize.

Undeterred by the midwives’ civil disobedience Pharaoh then ordered all Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the Nile. Evil always overreaches.

II Birth

When Moses was born his mother wove a basket and made of it a little ark. She place baby Moses in the basket and hid it behind some bulrushes in the Nile so the soldiers would not take him. She stationed Moses’ sister, Miriam, to watch over him.

One day the Pharaoh’s daughter just happened to be bathing in the Nile nearby, and heard the baby cry. When she saw him her heart tumbled out toward him. Then Moses’ sister appeared and said that she knew a good Hebrew woman who could nurse the child. So she ran and got Moses’ mother who was paid by Pharaoh’s daughter to nurse the child until weaned, at which time Pharaoh’s daughter would take him to the Pharaoh’s palace as her adopted son. Only God could pull something like that off.

Moses was raised by the Pharaoh’s daughter in royal privilege and given the best education, the best everything, available in that ancient world.

But God's spirit intervened. One day Moses went out and saw the suffering of his Hebrew people. And seeing them he was moved to help. It's a divine drama we've seen throughout history: people of privilege seeing the suffering of people and being moved to help them. I think of the Buddha, St. Francis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day.

Jewish commentary says that Moses first tried to work within the system, to no avail. Then one day he saw an Egyptian overlord savagely beating a Hebrew slave. Rage consumed him, and he threw himself on the Egyptian and killed him. Moses the murderer. This act changed the course of his life and the course of history. With a death sentence hanging over his head, Moses fled far away to the desert land of Midian. In Midian he met Jethro and his seven daughters. He married one of them, Zipporah and became the keeper of Jethro's flocks.

III The Call

One day while tending sheep he saw a burning bush. He turned aside to look more closely and discovered it was a bush burning but curiously not consumed by the fire.

How often do we miss the burning bushes of our lives. Preoccupied by the ten thousand things, we hurry on.

But Moses stopped. A Voice called him by name, "Moses," then said, "Take off your shoes, this is holy ground." Have you ever felt something so holy it made you want to *do* something, bow your head or lift your hands or take off your shoes? Muslims take off their shoes, out of reverence, when they enter a house of worship. As do Buddhists when they enter a temple.

The Voice said, I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. I have seen the affliction of my people and heard their cry.” Then God said, “I will send you to Pharaoh to deliver my people.” So here we see the character of God: God is always on the side of the oppressed, the dispossessed, those with their backs against a wall. The question is not whose side *God* is on but whose side *we* are on.

Moses mounted every objection he could to God’s call: Who am I to go against Pharaoh? I st-stutter. Objection after objection. God answered patiently, “I will be with you.”

When Moses said, “I am heavy of mouth and slow of tongue,” God said, “who made the mouth, the tongue?” Martin Buber wrote: “It is laid upon the stammering to bring the Voice of Heaven to Earth.”

Jewish commentary says it took seven days to persuade Moses. “Six days to create the world. Seven days to change a man’s mind.”

When Moses asked, “What is your Name? Who shall I say sent me?” God gave him God’s name, YHWH. Say YHWH has sent you.

We guess at its pronunciation and meaning: I AM WHO I AM, I CAUSE TO BE WHAT I CAUSE TO BE. I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.

It is a name elusive and untranslatable, wrapped in mystery. Professor Toni Craven suggests that the meaning of giving such a name is this: “Call me Yahweh, follow me and I will teach you what it means.”

The Jews out of reverence will not pronounce the holy name Yahweh. They substitute Adonai, Lord. When they write the name “God” they leave out the vowel, “o” G-d. Would we have such reverence for God’s name. We slap it on bumperstickers. Speak too easily of God’s will. We should stammer when we talk of God.

IV Exodus

The book of Exodus describes in feverish pace what happened next. Moses pleading with Pharaoh: “Let my people go.” Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he said no. Then came ten plagues, the last breaking through Pharaoh’s heart. Yes, you can go.

We can feel in our bones the terror and excitement of that last day. The jostling and shouting of Moses’ lieutenants, urging the people on: Let’s go, fast, faster before Pharaoh changes his mind. They took unleavened bread, bread for the road. No time to let the bread rise.

Soon after leaving the city the Hebrews found themselves boxed in , the Red Sea just ahead, Pharaoh’s troops just behind. Pharaoh *had* changed his mind.

The people panicked, but Moses said, “Stop your crying, the Lord will save you.” Then he stretched out his hand, a strong easterly wind blew back the waters, and the people crossed the sea on muddy ground. Then as Pharaoh’s horses and chariots followed they got stuck in the mud, the waters swept back, and the Egyptian soldiers drowned beneath the waves.

Miriam, Moses' sister, took up a tambourine and lifted a song of thanks and praise:

Sing to Yahweh

For God has triumphed greatly

Horse and rider God has thrown into the sea.

V Wilderness and Torah

Moses led the people through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. It took 40 years of wandering to get there. It is true for all of us: we all taste wilderness somewhere on the way to the Promised Land.

They crossed the desert to Mt. Sinai where God gave to Moses the Ten Commandments. "I bore you on eagles' wings," God said, "and brought you to myself." I brought you out of slavery, God said, now to *stay* free,

Thou shalt not...

Thou shalt not...

Thou shalt not...

Ten in all. Ten Commandments that formed a series of questions God asked them and has asked us from that day until now:

Will you remember that I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage in Egypt? Will you promise to worship no other God? Nor to make graven images to worship them?

Will you keep the Sabbath holy? Preserve the holiness of the family, honor you parents, respect the sanctity of marriage. Do you promise never to steal, never to murder, never to lust after what is not yours? Will you cleave to my words and follow my way?

After Moses received the commandments on top of Mt. Sinai, he went back down the mountain. What he saw when he got there he could not believe: His people dancing and singing around a golden calf. Moses had been gone so long that they turned to worship a god they could see and touch and fashion with their own hands. It is always tempting to worship that we can see, touch and fashion rather than the God we cannot see. Golden calves often beat out the impalpable God. Harvey Cox has written a recent book called *The Market as God*, meaning the stock market, the economy. We might call it “Dowism,” the worship of the Dow Jones Average. Idolatry.

Moses was so angry that he threw down the tablets containing the Ten Comandments and broke them into a hundred pieces.

He had had just about enough. What was he to do with this stiff-necked, belly-aching, fickle-faithed people? No sooner had they left Egypt they were complaining: why did you make us leave? Did you lead us out so we would die in the desert?

Three days after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea they were complaining about something to drink, then something to eat. “Let us go back to Egypt ,” they cried, “ at least there had enough to eat.” Even after God gave them *manna* to eat they belly-ached.

At one point Moses cried out, “O God, what am I to do with this ungrateful people? One more incident and they will stone me to death.” On another occasion he had to remind them he had not gotten rich at their expense. You only say that when you’ve been accused. “Who knows,” suggests Elie Wiesel, “perhaps God’s decision not to let him enter the Promised Land was meant as a reward rather than a punishment.”

How did Moses keep going? Once Moses asked for a sign, a little reassurance. “Let me see Your Face, your Glory,” he asked. God said, “I cannot let you see my Face, my Glory, else you will die, but I will let my Goodness (*tovha*) pass by.” Then God hid Moses in the cleft in a rock and covered his face with His Hand, so that what Moses saw was the backside of God, the trailing glory of God’s Goodness.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses the second time God described himself, his Goodness, what Moses saw that day in these words:

Yahweh, Yahweh

A God merciful and gracious

Slow to anger

Abounding with steadfast love

And faithfulness. (Exodus 34:6)

This is the essence of God. This verse is the favorite description of God in the Hebrew Bible, repeated often, what I call the John 3:16 of the Hebrew Bible.

VI The Death of Moses

This experience kept Moses going to the end of his life, until the day God showed him the Promised Land on Mt. Nebo, then called him home.

When Moses heard the word from God about his approaching death, he spent his last hours blessing the tribes of Israel, one by one. Then he began his climb up Mt. Nebo. Slowly he entered the cloud that covered the summit and waited for God.

Jewish tradition describes Moses' death this way:

When he reached the top of the mountain, he halted. You have one more minute, God warned him so as not to deprive him of his right to death. And Moses lay down. And God said: Close your eyes. And Moses closed his eyes. And God said: Fold your arms across your chest. And Moses folded his arms across his chest. Then silently, God kissed his lips. And the soul of Moses found shelter in God's breath and was swept away into eternity.

As scripture says, "So Moses died by the the mouth of Yahweh." (Deut. 34:5)

At the foot of the mountain the people of Israel wept for 30 days, partly out of guilt for how they treated him, partly out of grief for the loss of their leader and the part of God he had brought to them.

And from that time within their hearts was born a hope, that another would come, a New Moses, greater than the first who would bring a new law, this one not written on stone but on our hearts.

And come he did, the New Moses with a New covenant and a New Commandment,
“Love one another as I have loved you,” not to abolish Moses and the prophets but to fulfill
them.