

Fallen Heroes Sermon Series
Moses - Exodus 33:12-23
July 4, 2021
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

When I say the name “Moses,” what comes to mind? Some of you probably think of Moses parting the Red Sea. Others may picture Moses standing at the burning bush. I bet a few of you think of Charlton Heston and his flowing white beard. I hope there’s at least one or two that think of Mel Brooks holding the stone tablets in “History of the World Part I.” And if, when I say Moses, you think of Moses Malone, the former basketball player, you may need to come to church a little more often.

Moses is one of the most iconic characters in the Bible. Some of the most famous and well-known stories have Moses as their central protagonist. Moses is the human vessel God uses to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt, lead them through the Red Sea, deliver them the Ten Commandments and all the law, and guide them to the cusp of the Promised Land. If anyone in the Bible is a hero, it’s Moses. Or is it? As we continue our sermon series today looking at some of our Sunday School heroes who might not actually be heroes, we’re going to look at the story behind the story of Moses.

In Sunday School, we’re taught all the good parts. We know that, as a baby, Moses was placed in a basket and floated down the Nile until Pharaoh’s daughter rescued him. We know that God spoke to him through the burning bush and that Moses obediently followed God’s command to confront Pharaoh and exclaim, “Let my people go!” Even when the Israelites balked against his leadership, Moses stood firm in his faith. He sure sounds like a hero.

Would you consider a murderer a hero? Because that’s what Moses was. While he was still living in Egypt, he saw an Egyptian commander abusing an Israelite slave, so Moses killed him, which is why he ended up fleeing Egypt. That’s really all we’re told about the story, but it’s a dubious start for our hero. Why does God choose Moses, knowing what Moses had done?

When God does come to Moses at the burning bush, Moses is less than enthusiastic. God says, “I’m choosing you for this big job,” and Moses says, “I don’t want it.” If he’s a hero, he’s a very reluctant one. He hems and haws until God finally puts God’s foot down and says, “Because I said so!” Not sure how much confidence I have in Moses’ leadership abilities when I know he’s killed someone and he doesn’t even want to do what God is asking him to do.

But he does, confronting Pharaoh and leading the people out of Egypt. Along the way, he continues to argue with God, claiming that God picked the wrong guy and that Moses wasn’t up to the challenge. Even when God parts the waters of the Red Sea and allows the Israelites to pass through, Moses still struggles with his call. The people are restless and grumbling, complaining to Moses about the lack of food and water, saying they would rather go back to being slaves than die on this desert journey. But God is resolute in telling Moses to keep going. Moses is caught between the Rock and the hard-headed people.

They finally make it to the base of Mt. Sinai, where the Israelites set up camp while Moses goes up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments from God. The Israelites accept the commandments and pledge their undying loyalty to God...until about a week later. While Moses is gone up the mountain, they break the first two commandments by fashioning a Golden Calf which they can worship in God’s place. Moses is so mad at the Israelites for breaking the commandments that he takes the stone tablets, on which the commandments are written, and smashes them on the ground. By doing so, Moses breaks the covenant that had been made

between God and the people. Their relationship is strained, their vows have been broken, God is ready to wipe them all out, and once again, the Israelites are at a dead-end. God went into God's room and slammed the door, the Israelites went into their room and slammed the door, and Moses is caught out in the hallway, completely helpless. So much for being a hero.

In the beginning of our chapter today, God commands the Israelites to leave Mt. Sinai and head toward the Promised Land, where God will drive out the foreign nations - the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Termites, and the Cellulites - so the Israelites may live there. Then a very upset God says, "Go to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you, or else I would destroy you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." Moses has failed so miserably in his leadership that God is ready to abandon the whole project.

I've witnessed that level of frustration. My youth group was driving from Chicago to Kansas City in two church vans for a mission trip. About three hours into the drive, the lead van pulled off to the side of a busy highway. I was driving the second van, so I followed suit, worrying the whole time what was wrong. Did someone get sick? Is the van having problems? The driver got out of the van, stalked around to the side door, opened it, and dragged out one of the middle school boys. He grabbed him by the arm, marched him to our van, opened the door, and said with deep exasperation, "Here. He's all yours."

I think that might be how God is feeling here. God basically says to the Israelites, "If we make this journey together, one of us won't reach the destination." In our passage today, we're overhearing a conversation between God and Moses that takes place right after this pronouncement. I find it amazing that, after all that Moses has done wrong, from murder to doubt to bungling his leadership responsibilities, God still has faith in Moses. God listens to him when Moses asks, "Show me your ways. Show me your glory."

This is a critical moment in the relationship between God and Moses. By asking to be shown God's way, and then asking to see God's glory, Moses is seeking to know God as much as possible. In this world of ambiguity and competing agendas, sometimes we just want to KNOW, don't we? We may not be lugging around a million stiff-necked, cow-worshipping ex-slaves, we may not be able to part the water in our bathtub, but we have our own burdens and anxieties, don't we? We need a pep talk from the Big Coach now and then. But, like Moses, we've also messed up. We've doubted. We've disappointed God. I wonder if we sometimes feel like God wants to walk away from us. Or already has.

Still Moses, is bold enough to ask God to show Moses the plan. And God says..."No." God doesn't offer Moses a glimpse of the plan, but God offers him something even greater. After some negotiations, God retracts his earlier threat and promises to go with Moses and the Israelites to the Promised Land, saying, "I will do the very thing that you asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Wait! Isn't this Moses the murderer? Moses the doubter? Moses the failure? Doesn't matter to God. Doesn't matter what we've done or how far we've run or how long we've stayed away. Good or bad, we are known by God.

In one of strangest instances of humanizing God in all of scripture, God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, covers the opening and passes by, removing God's hand so that Moses can see God's back. Have you ever seen that? I bet you have. In the moment, we have trouble seeing God, concluding that God isn't with us or God doesn't love us. But in hindsight, as we look back, we can see where God has been, what God has done, how God has left a mark in our lives, like the divine wake God leaves behind.

Through this action, God recommits to the fallen hero Moses and the stubborn, stiff-necked Israelites. At the burning bush, God sealed the agreement with Moses by giving God's name. Here, God seals it with a more intimate encounter. The only way to know someone more closely than knowing their name is meeting them in person, even if it is only from the back. In the next chapter, Moses will make two new tablets and write God's laws on them, re-establishing the covenant that was broken with the Golden Calf.

That covenant will last, even though the Israelites will continue to break it. God gave them all these laws to help them know how to be God's people in this world, and yet time and time again the people disappointed God. So God sent prophets to the people, folks like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to remind the people of the covenant God made with them. The people would repent for a time and recommit themselves to following the laws, but they were humans, so eventually they would revert back to their sinful behavior, murdering and doubting and arguing, breaking their end of the covenant over and over again.

Finally, God threw up God's hands and said, "This isn't working." It would have been completely understandable if God had given up on us, if God had truly turned God's back on these stiff-necked people and left them to rot in the cesspool of their own unfaithfulness and sin. But instead of turning God's back, God turned the other way. In Jesus Christ, God turned around so we could see God's face. Through Christ, God says to us, "Here I am. I love you. I want to know you. I am with you." Despite all that we have done and left undone, we have seen God face to face.

Through Christ, God has said to us, "I am with you. My presence goes with you." And each day, we have a chance to see this presence, to glimpse God's glory all around us. Where do you see it? I see it anytime I visit a newborn in the hospital or go hiking. Maybe you see it in a radiant sunset or a blooming flower. Maybe you hear it in a favorite song or a loved one's voice. Maybe you smell it in fresh baked bread or taste it at the communion table. God's glory is ALL around us! God IS with us! We have seen it!

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries, and daub their natural faces unaware." Are we aware that we have seen God? Do our faces reflect the glory we have seen? Do our words echo the joy that fills us? Do our actions imitate the grace we have received? No matter how checkered our past, how pervasive our doubts, how many times we've told God "no," the glory of God has been revealed to us – to us! The Bible tells us that God says to Moses, "I know you by name." Through Christ, God has said the same to you.