

Exodus | The Rise of a Liberator

Return of the Liberator

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Exodus 4.18ff

Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."¹⁹ Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand.²¹ The LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go."²² "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn.'²³ "So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'"

²⁴ *Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me."²⁶ So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood"-- because of the circumcision.*

²⁷ *Now the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.²⁸ Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which He had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him to do.²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel;³⁰ and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people.³¹ So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped.*

Today's sermon is a kind of PART TWO from last week's teaching IN THAT, last week we heard the CALL OF MOSES and this week we see his response to the call.

This week we see the substance of his new beginning and Moses embarks on a journey back to Egypt after a 40-year stint as a shepherd in the wilderness. Now, he returns as a liberator to shepherd the PEOPLE of Abraham OUT of slavery and into the worship of the God they seem to have forgotten but who has NOT forgotten THEM. Today, Moses' journey begins.

Some of YOU are at the start of something NEW in your lives... some of you are thinking more of the ending of things... but we all, even the oldest among us face new beginnings all the time. Things change and the changes call for a different response. We have to launch out into uncharted waters... and IF we are believers in God, and in relationship with God we will have a sense that God is calling us or beckoning us onward WITH Him in this journey and this new beginning. So...how to respond, what to expect... what's the goal... how will we change?

Let's let Moses' response/journey instruct us: 1) A Journey in THREE PARTS 2) Sightseeing Along the Way 3) Lessons Learned and Applied

Do you know what the Three Parts of a journey are? Of course, the beginning, middle and end and THAT'S how the passage is organized.

The journey begins with The Calling we saw last week and repeated here. Moses tells his father-in-law, Jethro, what's happening and probably v.19 means. "Now the LORD HAD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.'" In other words, "My rescue has begun – the slaves are alive but their original masters are NOT..."

When a journey like this begins there's an initial surge of fear (last week) excuses...more reasons why this is a bad idea...arguing with yourself...with God...may even culminate with a refusal (as in Moses) ...but eventually...God wins...and the believer BELIEVES...and he/she sets out, obeys, embarks.

YOU COULD BE DOING SOMETHING LIKE THIS (not going to OPPOSE AN EMPIRE...set a nation free...save the world etc.) but something significant. You may be...entering college...entering marriage... embarking on a new job...joining a church...starting retirement (what will THAT do to you?!)... facing an illness (clearly a calling from God that you didn't choose...) and YOU may (in fact you MUST [if you see this as a calling]) YOU MUST see this as beyond your ability to execute...MUST have a sense (as we saw last week) that the idea that "God will never give you more than you can handle" is silly and that God always gives you more than you can handle – that's the very nature of true spirituality (IT MUST BE LIVED BY GRACE AND BY DEPENDENCE ON AN ALIEN POWER , this is the life that's impossible without the power of God's Spirit ("NOT by might, NOT by power but by My Spirit says the Lord of HOSTS" Zec 4.6)

PERSONALLY, I've HAD this sense a number of times in my life...college...seminary...when I asked Missy to marry me ("REALLY?! I'm gonna lay down my life for another human being with all my selfishness and irresponsibility I used to forget to put gas in my car and have to leave it on the side of the road and have to hitchhike home...in a wheelchair ...I'm not kidding!" and I'm gonna love this woman in sickness and health...IMPOSSIBLE W/O the grace/presence/power of "I AM"... and yet...after the struggle with God (doubts expressed, the excuses, even refusal) and after...you've repented and believed and YOU'VE LAUNCHED – what choice do you have?...You

set out – receive the promises of God and answered the call by faith... a big hurdle...but the journey's just begun.

And after it begins, the fun starts – God once again reiterates His calling and the fuel for the CALL – the Promises and His intentions “ Israel is My FIRSTBORN” – that a huge assurance! God will do this! He who called You is faithful; He WILL bring it to pass; He is present...the “I Am” is with you and IN YOU...PRESS ON!

And then...in the MIDDLE OF THIS FIRST LEG of the journey... stuff happens... (GTW – Dave Barry – “You can't make this stuff UP!”). Moses is somehow ALMOST executed by God...HE IS TO REPRESENT THE GOD of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but HE has not identified with God's people, hasn't joined the team...hasn't established this explicit and all important connection with Abraham as EVIDENCED by giving His firstborn son the mark of the COVENANT – i.e. circumcision.

Somehow...and we're not told how, God appears or some way makes a THREAT very evident to Moses and Zipporah. And God makes the reason for this threat VERY clear i.e. Moses has not circumcised his sons. Moses' firstborn and the firstborn of the Egyptians are indistinguishable...It's HIS responsibility ... but it falls to HER...and she has to take up the knife... and throws the bloody flesh at Moses and calls him a “bridegroom of blood”

You may know the great Cecil B. DeMille movie The Ten Commandments cast Charlton Heston...A new movie adaptation (Dec 14th only two months from now) and who is cast as Moses? Christian Bale...But I think they really blew it...the clear choice was Woody Allen.

And then...firstborn (and presumably second born sons) circumcised, identified WITH God's people and distinguished from the first-born of the Egyptians...they arrive in Egypt – the journey (at least this first leg of the journey) is over/completed.

Aaron has been given a revelation and comes to meet his long-lost brother... Moses finds Aaron primed and ready to go...Moses gives his big brother the words ...they gather the elders of Israel (living IN Egypt) and Aaron gives them the NEWS...and they do signs (perhaps with this staff – the STAFF of God – remember the STAFF was like a driver's license like a passport, an identifier...and this is called The Staff of God v.20 – it's Moses' credentials that he represents the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...)

And the people hear the GOOD NEWS... see the miracles authenticating the News and they believe. They see themselves IN A NEW WAY, as the Firstborn of God, the Israelites, the people of Abraham, loved by God, like a Father loves his own son... like an infinitely IMPORTANT person has NOTICED them...has visited them...WHAT AN AMAZING sense of privilege and security and purpose and meaning – “God (who made all the stars) has NOTICED us...” and it leads them to WORSHIP... “they bowed LOW to Worship...”

Worship has RESUMED in Israel...They are seeing the beauty and infinite WORTH of this true and living God...taste and see...the chief end for which they were made a nation...the reason for their being...they are NOT being freed to do whatever they want...it's like a Blue Whale returned to the water...like a majestic old locomotive pulled from the Everglades and put back on a track – they are FREE to BECOME what they were created to be, the PEOPLE who know God and see His goodness and grace and truth: the people who are free to know and worship God – and thereby become fully human.

Now - Sight-seeing Along the Way: what are we to make of the sights we've seen along the way and how can we relate them to our own journey?

Let's name three – one from beginning, one from middle and one from end:

First time in the Bible that Israel is called the Firstborn of God – and this word from God is an enormous reinforcement/support for Moses' faith.

God will defend them like a Perfect Father would defend His own beloved child. And Moses is seeing that God has claimed this people, identified and attached Himself to Abraham's descendants. His commitment is thicker than water.

And, of course, this reverberates through the whole Bible...in fact it gets louder as we go until the Personification of Israel is born, Israel concentrated in One Person, the perfect Son, THE Firstborn over all creation, Jesus Christ is born and God the Father is pleased to substitute HIM for the sins of His people...

This is one of the sights we see on Moses' initial journey – the firstborn sons of the Israelites will be “passed-over” and spared because THE firstborn Son of God, Jesus Christ WILL NOT be spared. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be known in the NT as “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all” (Rom 8.32). We get a clear reference to this at the start of Moses journey.

Second, from the odd incident (the stuff you just can't make up!) in the middle of the journey – what we see in this picture is #1 – That God has NO interest in being some generic DEITY...He Is who HE IS, the God of Abraham. And for Moses to be at all cavalier or forgetful of that truth is a complete deal-breaker. Moses MUST (above all things!) maintain continuity with God and His covenant, His self-revelation and unbreakable commitment to Abraham/Isaac/Jacob... AND this foreshadowing of Moses independent streak will be something that haunts him and eventually will lead to his biggest failing.

But secondly what this really odd little vignette tells us is that God is in the process of making Moses a truly humble man (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was

on the face of the earth. - Num 12.3) and it was important that Moses knew that HE was just as negligent and disobedient as the other Israelites OR even as the Egyptians. He deserved to die...just like they did. It was Moses' wife who made things right...Moses KNEW personal failure (he knows God and now he is introduced to HIMSELF as well...he feels failure and he FEELS NEED) and thus he was able to sympathize with weak and sinful people...and that would be REALLY important in his BIG journey because Moses was surrounded by a lot of weak and sinful people all his life.

And finally from the end of this leg of the journey THE sight we see is God Himself. The very last word, the literal END of this section is the word "worshipped". And that's what we'll see from start to finish in Exodus. There's an apparent absence of God and of worship at the start...but now the people of Abraham are seeing the beauty and grace and truth of God...and they are realizing that they were MADE for the beatific vision.

Bob Dylan said it, "You gotta serve somebody!" Everyone worships something (even atheists). But TRUE human freedom comes ONLY when we worship the true and living God. And Israel is just starting to see that that in the final word of this passage.

Let me end with some more direct application of these sights from the journey: Lessons Learned and Applied.

First, think of your own life and the place worship occupies in your life and routine. Does worship engage you? Do you have this sense of not just asking God for things or for help but a sense that God has claimed YOU and redeemed YOU and adopted you as a son/daughter because of what Jesus Christ accomplished? And does that strike awe into you and joy? That's the real end God has for us and if we're beginning to see it, it really does free us...the difficulties of life won't crush us...criticisms and inconveniences lose their power...when we see God delighting in us as the adopted children bought with the Blood of the Firstborn, Jesus Christ!

Second, failure isn't fun and we don't want to play with it or trivialize it. "Should we sin in order to get more grace?", asked Paul and his answer was "NO WAY!" However... failures do come. Moses failed big here and it really does foreshadow the Israelites' MANY failures and prepares Moses to humbly deal with them. He KNOWS what it is to deserve death...

And YOUR failures, which God promises in the Gospel to work together for good, those failures CAN and should be a source of sympathy and humility as you, relate to other people. Better is the sin that humbles you than the virtue that makes you arrogant and self-righteous (paraphrase Thomas Watson).

A third thing we learn from this strange incident is the absolute necessity of being in complete solidarity with God and His people: Again Paul wrote, "to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3.21)" Our ritual isn't circumcision

but baptism – but more than just a ritual is the actual, practical, relational connection we have to Jesus Christ AND the Church. And that’s another reason we emphasize that Christians connect to the church...without that connection, the Lord’s Supper is a mockery and can even, according to the NT be a cause of judgment (1 Cor 11) If you are NOT a member of a church – take this as a warning AND an invitation. There are NO lone-ranger-Christians on the journey themselves.

Last, Whenever, God has us embark on a new beginning of any kind, He wants us to shower and soak in His promises. Fully half of this first paragraph is God telling Moses what Moses already heard... I have plans for you. I am infinitely committed to you...preach the Good News to yourself. Drink in the promises.

You easily forget, but you who believe in Jesus Christ and have heard My call and embarked on the journey, YOU are My cherished children and I gave My Beloved Firstborn to make you such. Believe. Believe. Believe.