

“Smoke Signals”

Exodus 3:1-15

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If our Jewish friends had a Mount Rushmore in Israel, Moses' image would be on it. He is that significant and important to their history.

We don't know the exact date of Moses' birth, but it appears to have been about 1,500 years before the time of Christ, give or take a hundred years. What we do know is that Moses was born in Egypt during a time when Pharaoh felt threatened by the growing number of Hebrews in his land and declared that all male babies be killed in an attempt to reduce their population.

Moses' life was spared when his mother, Jochebed, secretly placed him in a small basket and floated him down the Nile, hoping an Egyptian would rescue him and raise him as their own. Jochebed's dreams came true when Pharaoh's own daughter found Moses and adopted him, raising him in the Royal Family.

Fast forward to today's text. Moses is now a married man tending a flock of sheep on behalf of his father-in-law, Jethro. He is in a remote place on the Sinai Peninsula far from the hub of Egypt's cultural, religious and political center. How did he end up there?

Moses had to leave Egypt abruptly and flee to the region of the Midianites after it was discovered he killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a Hebrew slave. When this incident was reported to Pharaoh, he was incensed and vowed to seek revenge.

Since Moses was well known by most Egyptians, having grown up in the royal palace, he had to go to a distant place to find safety. While on the run, he came across a well in the region of Midian and stopped to rest.

At that rest stop, he came to the rescue of Jethro's seven daughters whose animals were being denied access to water from the well by the other shepherds. When Jethro heard about Moses' concern and courage, he invited Moses to stay with him and his family.

To sweeten the offer, Jethro offered Moses one of his daughters, Zipporah, in marriage. It is apparent Jethro needed a man to help run the family business, and he wasn't going to let Moses get away. Moses accepted Jethro's offer, married Zipporah and put down roots in Midian.

One day while Moses was on Mount Horeb guiding and guarding Jethro's sheep, his attention was drawn to a bush which seemed to be on fire but was not consumed. As he approached this bush, he heard a voice from heaven, which would turn out to be God's voice, telling him to take off his shoes for he was standing on holy ground.

God proceeded to inform Moses he was aware of the plight of the Hebrew people in Egypt and wanted to deliver them from their life of oppression, misery and despair. God also told Moses he wanted him to be a partner in this endeavor by going to Pharaoh and demanding he let the Israelites go free.

Immediately, Moses resisted God's invitation because he knew this challenge was filled with great risks and dangers. Moses was a wanted man in Egypt, even though he had been gone for several years, and he believed his return could result in his arrest and death. From Moses' perspective, this mission had failure written all over it!

Because of his fears and lack of confidence, Moses asked God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God said, "I will be with you, and this will be a sign to you that it is I who sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I say to them?”

God said to Moses, “I Am who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. ‘I Am has sent me to you.’ ” (Exodus 3:11-14)

The tug-of-war between God and Moses continued for some time as Moses offered more excuses and even greater resistance to God’s call and challenge. Finally, Moses embraced God’s dream and agreed to go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. He returned with his family and Jethro’s blessing to the place he grew up to prepare his people for their epic journey to freedom.

I consider this encounter between God and Moses on that lonely hillside on the Sinai Peninsula to be one of the most important stories in the Bible. I am confident it has shaped the life and molded the faith of every person that has studied it. I know it has mine. Let me tell you how.

The description of Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Horeb gives me a better understanding of and deeper appreciation for who God is, and it shows me what it means to be a person of faith. This is an essential component of spiritual formation.

When the conversation between God and Moses began in front of that burning bush, Moses appeared to have little knowledge of God. He did not even know how to address God, what name he should use.

“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exodus 3:13)

“God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you.’ ” (Exodus 3:14)

This conversation was the beginning of Moses’ spiritual formation. It was the first of many encounters with God, all of which led Moses to become a person of deep faith.

What can we learn about God from this divine encounter with Moses, and what does it teach us about being a person of faith as Moses was? Let's explore these two questions in our remaining time.

This passage teaches me that...

...God cares deeply about people. Moses came to understand his call from God was connected to the pleas for help God heard from the lips of his kinsmen.

“And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:9-10)

The living conditions of the Hebrew children in Egypt were deplorable and getting worse each day. They were at a breaking point and feeling the deepest level of despair.

God was fully aware of their plight and heard their pleas for help. As a result, God's heart was touched and his spirit was moved to respond to their cries for deliverance by making hope visible.

Dr. David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics at McAfee School of Theology, believes the truest human language is tears, and the best test of human beings is how they respond to tears.

God passes this test every day. What about you?

This passage teaches me that...

...God means business when it comes to exposing injustice, confronting those responsible for it and relieving suffering. God was willing to use all his power and influence to defeat evil and to liberate his people from oppression. By telling Moses his name, God indicated he would hold nothing back in his pursuit of justice and peace.

I shall never forget how Dr. Roy Honeycutt, Jr. interpreted the name given to God in this passage. This world renowned Old Testament scholar, who wrote the commentary for Exodus

in the original Broadman Bible Commentary, taught the book of Exodus when I was a student in the seminary. I can still hear his words and recall the notes I took.

“Although it is impossible to fully comprehend the author’s intent when relaying God’s name to his readers, it appears God’s name has the characteristics of a verb, not a noun. In all probability, it is based upon the verb, *hayah*, to be.

‘I Am that I Am’ means: I will do whatever I must do or become whatever I must become to save, redeem and take care of my people. No task is too menial, no sacrifice is too great, and no challenge is too big.

From Moses’ conversation with God on Mount Horeb, we understand that God is distant and intimate, hidden and known, ‘other than’ and incarnate.

But at all times and in every situation, God is working on behalf of oppressed and distressed people. Furthermore, God will make available to those who partner with him to respond to those in need all the wisdom, strength and power needed to faithfully carry out their duties.”

This means anyone who responds to their neighbor’s pleas for help is in the presence of God because God is already there. This is where God’s heart is and where his power is fully displayed.

This passage teaches me that...

...God thinks big. The last thing Moses thought would ever occur in Egypt under Pharaoh’s reign was the safe release of over one million Jewish slaves. This was especially true given the fact they had no military or leverage.

As grieved as Moses had to be over the plight of his people, he saw no way their circumstances were going to change in his lifetime. Moses’ defeatist attitude changed, though, when he turned his attention from his weaknesses and inadequacies and focused it upon a God who would equip, empower and accompany him on this dangerous mission. With God, Moses discovered, all things are possible.

God always dreams bigger than we do, doesn't he? Perhaps this is because God has the heart of a loving parent who will move heaven and earth to get to his troubled children and will go to any lengths to make a bad situation better.

This kind of love is willing to do the difficult. I suppose the more you love the bigger you dream.

This passage teaches me that...

...God does not take 'no' for an answer, at least not without trying to persuade someone to change their mind. Five times during their conversation that day in front of the burning bush, Moses offered resistance to God's invitation to join him in making hope visible for those living in misery and pain.

Every time Moses voiced an objection, God replied with a response that overrode it. Ultimately, Moses yielded to God's irresistible call and a partnership was formed that we're still talking about three thousand years later.

The Emma Quire Mission Center in Owsley County that our church founded over ten years ago is named for one of our most faithful and spirited members, Ms. Emma Quire. She passed away about a year before I became your pastor, but I can say without hesitation her memory is alive and well in the hearts of many of our members.

The most memorable thing I have heard about Ms. Emma was her persistence. She never took no for an answer when soliciting help on a mission project.

When she came to you with a request, or better yet an order, no excuse you offered would get you off the hook. Short of lying in a casket in the funeral home, you were going to do her bidding.

I have to believe God smiled each time he listened in on one of Ms. Emma's conversations. I am confident Moses did, too.

This passage teaches me that...

...believing in God and following God's lead will not be easy. It wasn't for Moses, and it will not be for anyone who is serious about the same things God considers important.

To be perfectly candid with you, there is no safe place to hide when God calls a person to minister to the beaten, the broken and the lost. Responding to their pleas for help will take you directly into the eye of the storm.

Moses found this to be true. The day came when he stood vulnerable before Pharaoh and demanded that Pharaoh let his people go. At that moment, he was standing in front of the one person who could order his execution and have him instantly killed.

There was no Plan B, a safe approach to dealing with this challenge. There was no exit strategy that would lead him to safety.

What Moses did have, though, was God's promise to take every step with him on this journey toward hope and healing. Moses would never be alone or lack for a reservoir of wisdom and courage from which to draw.

This passage teaches me that...

...people of faith have certain qualities and traits. Like Moses, they are observant, inquisitive, compassionate and courageous.

They are good listeners and respond to pleas for help others ignore.

They don't let fear control them and talk them out of doing what God has laid upon their hearts.

They have generous spirits and are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of those who are struggling to survive.

They don't let unanswered questions keep them from doing what they know to be true.

They trust God to live up to his name.

Does this describe you? Would you like it to?

This week, think about where you fall short and ask God to help you bridge that gap.