

“On the Road Again! God’s People are Supposed to be on the Move”

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March 20, 2016

Scripture

Exodus 3:1-14

Sermon

As you know we have spent Lent talking about journeys and we have look at some of the many “40’s” in scripture.

The story of Moses and the Exodus is of course the biggest of all the “40’s” in the Bible.

“The Exodus” is the Biblical story of a journey. An epic and ancient journey by a group of Hebrew slaves, through sea and desert, through triumph and tragedy as they made their way to a place promised to them by God. It is the consummate and quintessential journey story that is the central formative story for Judaism.

It was a 40 year odyssey where a fairly desperate group of folks, in the crucible of the desert wilderness not only became an organized religion but a nation called to worship God. But as we also know it was not all fun and games. It was hard, hot, dry and long!

It was 40 years filled with times of despair and lots of literal blood, sweat and tears. But they managed to hang together and they kept going! And most importantly, God never ever gave up on them!

Our journey, to where God is leading us, is often quite similar. It too is filled with both joy and sadness, despair and hope, times of dryness and mountain top experiences! It is both a destination and a journey. A journey filled with difficulties but also moments of transcendent glimpses into that glorious reality that God has in store!

The Exodus from Egypt actually begins with the birth of Moses when God's supposedly chosen people were slaves in Egypt. It ends when those former slaves begin to settle in a land that had earlier been promised to their ancestor Abraham. And so it is really more of a story of return than it is a story about the conquest of new lands to establish a new nation.

Now the entire epic is recorded for us in the Hebrew Scriptures in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. Taking up five books, 161 chapters and approximately 150 pages of tightly condensed text and small fonts in my bible, it is the longest story in the Bible.

But allow me to quickly hit some of the highlights. After his birth, Moses' mother tries to save him from the infanticidal laws of the state by floating him in a basket on the river Nile.

He is saved, fished out of the river by a daughter of the Pharaoh who then raised him as her very own son.

But as an adult Moses must flee the kingdom after murdering an Egyptian whom he witnessed abusing a slave.

While in the wilderness of the Sinai, he married, began a family and takes up the occupation of a shepherd.

Then one day, while guiding his flock, we have the encounter that was read earlier. Moses was hesitant and so God infused his walking staff with miraculous powers to not only bolster Moses' insecurities but to prove as well, to both friend and foe that God was really backing him. Reluctantly Moses agreed to the plan and returned to Egypt.

Understandably Pharaoh resisted Moses' demand to free Egypt's slaves, even after Moses performs a number of tricks with his magic stick!

So God must up the ante by sending various plagues that included; locusts, flies, gnats, frogs, floods, famine and skin diseases. But not until after tenth plague did Pharaoh finally relent and actually pleaded for Moses to get the Hebrews out ASAP.

This last event becomes Passover, which is still observed by Jews today and it is the basis of the Seder meal that we will share together this coming Thursday evening.

However this motley band did not get very far before Pharaoh began to regret his decision and in a rage sent his army out to bring them back!

Now with their backs to the sea and Pharaoh's army bearing down on them, fear of their imminent doom spreads and began plotting surrender and hopefully return to Egypt. But God instructed Moses to strike the sea with his stick and voila' the water split apart revealing a dry path for the chosen of God to make their way to the other side.

Not wanting them to escape, Pharaoh's army plunged headlong into the parted sea but the waters soon come crashing down on them and thus both horses and riders perished in the sea.

Safe and dry the Children of Israel then made their way to Mt Sinai, (also called Horeb) which was the same place where Moses had met with God not so long ago in front of a burning bush.

God then called Moses to come to the mountain top for meeting and so Moses climbed the mountain which was covered with clouds as the thunder crashed and lighting flashed.

For forty days and forty nights the two of them hammered out Ten Commandments on two slabs of stone.

But meanwhile, back at the bottom of the hill, those whom God had chosen and who had just been saved from the Egyptian army, began to worry and wonder if Moses would ever return?

After all they heard the thunder and saw the lightening and so they became a bit anxious. And perhaps with too many idle hands and minds they decided to craft a bull calf out of gold and begin to worship it.

But Moses did finally return and when he saw what was happening he became so angry that he threw the tablets to the ground breaking them into pieces. And in his fury he took those pieces and ground them into powder and made a cocktail that he then forced everyone to drink.

But the real consequence of their lack of faith meant that they would end up wandering around in the desert for 40 more years. And then again, one more time, Moses had to climb the mountain so that God could carve a duplicate set of tablets.

And so that is exactly what happened for the next 40 years. It was hot and dry and the dust blew day after day after day! Many days they would complain about the heat or the lack of food, or water and they would often begin to recall just how good life was back in merry old Egypt - seemingly they had forgotten how bad being slaves really was.

Some days they complained about the likelihood of having to die out in the desolate wilderness. Other days they openly wished that they could just die rather than to go on in hopelessness and despair. But God stuck with them in spite of their unfaithfulness and all that constant whining.

In order that they might avoid traveling in the heat of the day, God sent a pillar of light, a kind of cosmic flashlight, so they could travel during the night and rest during the day.

When they ran out of water Moses was instructed to strike a boulder with that special stick of his and God created a fresh spring of to pour fourth into the desert.

When they ran out of food, God made manna appear in the early mornings and they would go out and gather enough to eat for each day. And when they complained about the lack of variety in their diets - "what we have to eat manna again?!"

God sent a flock of quail of into the middle of their camp. Yes it was hard, and yes they had some good reasons to complain. But God did provide and God did keep them safe as they traversed a harsh and unforgiving landscape.

No doubt Moses made his share of mistakes, but they also learned to trust his leadership.

No doubt they got on each others' nerves most days, but they also learned to rely on each other and to take care of one another. Their long journey did finally make it to the land of promise. Was it literally flowing with milk and honey?

And when Moses finally died, Joshua took command.
Joshua had been sent as a spy by Moses into that promised land.

He had been part of a group of spies who spent 40 days
and 40 nights, sneaking and snooping about.
He was also one of only two who had encouraged
God's chosen to "go for it!" and finish their collective journey.

But most folks were too afraid, fearing the many unknowns
that lay ahead of them in that promised but unfamiliar land.
They began to argue the prudence of entering the land
and many were advocating that it was better to go back,
back into the wilderness and maybe even back to Egypt.

They had been through so much together, times of want
and moments where they experienced the miraculous works of God!
And yet they actually seriously considered going back
to where they had started, to Egypt and slavery!

Having arrived at the cusp of what God had long promised them,
and with one final step to realize it, they instead hesitated.

But how truly human is this?
How often have we seen others do this?
How many times have we done this ourselves?

What we have hoped and worked for, for so long is about to
be realized but we end up trying to sabotage it!

The promise lay before but fear of the unknown paralyzed them.

In reality one journey had come to an end
but a new journey, complete with new hopes and promises
and uncertainties was just beginning.

But this is the ancient truth about those who seek to follow God.
Those who desire to follow and be faithful to God
are folks who are constantly on the move forward.

We are called to be a movement people - folks on the move.
A pilgrim people on a journey that leads us towards our real home.

We are, as Stanley Hauerwas says, actually “Resident aliens” regardless of where we might be located at any given time. We can be happy where we are at but not necessarily content. We will work for the good of the people we live with but we are not citizens of any particular nation nor are we to become permanent residents of any particular place.

Our home is the Kingdom of God and we are marching, as that old hymn says, “onward to Zion, that beautiful city of God!”

Sometimes we may feel lost and alone wandering the deserts of life. At other times we may see far into the distant as we stand next to God on the top of a mountain.

We will feel dry and weary to the bone at times but we too will find refreshment during moments in that cool and damp oasis of God’s love.

I’m sure those folk who followed Moses must have wondered as they wandered, “Why do things have to be this difficult?” and “Why does life have to be so hard?” “After all if we are God’s chosen people, the ones whom God loves so much, shouldn’t God actually cut us a little slack once in a while?” “I mean, really, what are the perks for being faithful people of God?”

We too may feel the same way from time to time? I know I often ask the same questions. I am often tempted to feel sorry for myself and to complain when things do not go the way I think they should.

But God has chosen me as well. Chosen to love me and to be with me. And I too have made a choice, a choice to follow God.

I also have read enough and heard enough from others that it ain’t always gonna be easy. Actually more often than not it seems to be the very opposite. But I also have read and I have heard from those who have been more faithful than I, and for far longer than I, that it is, in the end, really worth it!

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