

Standing on Holy Ground  
Grace Chapel, Bear Creek PA  
August 25, 2019

**Scripture:**

**Exodus 1:8: Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.**

**Exodus 1:22: Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son who is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."**

**Exodus 2: 1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. 3 And when she could hide him no longer she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink. 4 And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. 5 Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, and her maidens walked beside the river; she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it. 6 When she opened it she saw the child; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call to you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take the child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give you wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. 10 And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son; and she named him Moses, for she said, "Because I drew him out of the water." [Heb. Mosheh, Heb. mashah]**

**11: One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. 12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together; and he said to the man that did the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow?" 14 He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known." 15 When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.**

**But Moses fled from Pharaoh, and stayed in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 The shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. 18 When they came to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come so soon today?" 19 They said, "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and even drew water for us and watered the flock." 20 He said to his daughters, "And where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." 21 And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. 22 She bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."**

**Exodus 3:1** Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father in law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. **3** And Moses said, “I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” **4** When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” **5** Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (RSV)

**Matthew 21:42** Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’” (RSV)

Moses is a familiar story. This is the beginning of The Exodus story, a message of God’s caring for his people, bringing them out of slavery to freedom with a powerful hand, and many signs and wonders. Today, though, I’d like to focus more closely on Moses himself. Let’s look at his journey.

Moses was born into a Hebrew family of the tribe of Levi. Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, also known as Israel. It’s been many generations. There are so many Children of Israel that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, decides to do something about it. The Hebrews are reduced to slavery. It is decreed that all male children are to be cast into the Nile River.

Moses is saved when he is discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopts him. He is raised as her son, as an Egyptian. An Egyptian of standing and privilege. Yet, he knows where he came from. As an adult, he goes out to see the condition of the people of his birth. He wanted to see for himself. This had to have been very, very disturbing. When he sees the Egyptian taskmaster beating one of the Hebrews, he kills him, and hides the body. The next day, when he tries to mediate a fight, he is asked, “Who made you a prince and judge over us?” That’s a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is, “Nobody.” The fact is, Moses has no authority, no standing, in the eyes of his own people. He might as well have been an Egyptian. In killing the taskmaster, he has cut off his identity and standing as an Egyptian of Pharaoh’s household. Yet, he cannot become a Hebrew again either. He is now just a criminal, worthy to be tracked down and killed.

Moses flees into the wilderness, east into the Sinai, and beyond, to the land of Midian. Midian is the area that would now be northwestern Saudi Arabia. He finds a well. If there are people about in a wasteland, and there’s a well, that’s probably where you will meet them. He likely does not have long to wait. Here come the seven daughters of the Priest of Midian, Jethro!

So, the seven sisters come to the well with Jethro’s flocks, probably sheep and goats. But then some shepherds show up after they, Jethro’s daughters, have drawn water. The shepherds use that water for their own sheep. This must have happened routinely. Only after the shepherds had finished, would the daughters be able to draw water again for their own flock.

Moses saw the injustice. He came to the aid of the daughters. He must have forced the shepherds to wait, and also helped draw water. Notice that Moses is identified by the daughters of Jethro as “An Egyptian”. Jethro welcomes Moses into the family. Moses settles down to the life of a herdsman. With seven daughters, and no son mentioned, Jethro was happy to adopt Moses into the family. We read in verse 21, “Moses was content to dwell with the man.” Moses lived that life for a long time. Biblical scholars reckon it as about 40 years. He could now be considered a naturalized Midianite. We know of two sons. The old Pharaoh eventually dies, and a new one comes to power. Yet the slavery of the Hebrews, those people Moses was born to far away in Egypt, wears on.

So, at this point, what is Moses? Is he Hebrew, as he was born? An Egyptian, as identified by the Midianites? Or a Midianite? I suppose it depends on who is talking. The Hebrews wouldn't claim him. Nor the Egyptians. Maybe he has been with the Midianites long enough that he is fully accepted as one of them. How long does it take? If you had asked Moses at this point, what would he say? Cindy and I have lived in this area now 28 years, but we're still from Virginia. When we lived in Maine, we found that anyone who had not been there for several generations was an outsider. As with many of us, Moses carried within himself a complex history.

And then, as Moses is going about his business, tending his father in law Jethro's flocks, he happens upon a burning bush, and is told, “The place where you are standing is Holy Ground.” Moses is confronted by God. This encounter is two chapters of the Book of Exodus. We don't have time to read it all. I expect you are familiar with it. I'll go over a few key points, keeping in mind Moses's history.

Perhaps Moses's first question to himself is, which god? Is it a god of the Egyptians? Well, he isn't in Egypt. Midianite? He's not in Midianite territory anymore either, he's further west. Hebrew? Remember, Moses lived in a world thought to be filled by many gods. Some were associated with peoples or territories, others with aspects of nature, and so on.

God answers this question right away: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Ah! So, he is the Hebrew god! The god Moses likely knows the least about.

God then gives Moses a mission:

**Exodus 3:7: Then the Lord said, I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.....**

And why is God telling this to Moses? We read in verse 10:

**Exodus 3: 10 “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”**

## **11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”**

Moses has a point. God answers it. The dialog continues with Moses pointing out all the reasons he is not the right person for this task. God has an answer for each one. Finally, Moses pleads, “Please send someone else.”

We often read this passage, from our perspective of more than 3000 years later, and find fault with Moses. We marvel at how he can question God or God’s power. But, looking at it from Moses’s perspective, maybe we can understand. Moses is no longer Egyptian; he has no standing to appear before Pharaoh. He isn’t a Hebrew either; his people rejected him. How can he represent them? Moses sees himself as just a wandering Midianite shepherd. He has no credibility or credentials before either the Egyptians or the Israelites. Why, indeed, would anybody listen to him? And who is this god, who dares to send him? Why, Pharaoh himself is held to be a god within Egypt! Is this god more powerful even than Pharaoh? I think we can all understand Moses has good reasons for his hesitancy.

Indeed, Moses doesn’t even know the name of the Hebrew god! He has to ask a really basic question: **“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name,’ what shall I say to them?”** (Exodus 3: 13)

God’s answer is amazing. He says, “I am who I am.” That could also be translated, “I will be what I will be.” What kind of a name is that? This isn’t your usual kind of god. Gods had names. Isis, Baal, Astarte, Ra, and many, many more. A priest had to know the name of a god in order to invoke his power to provide for rain, fertility, abundant harvest, or some other need that fell within the god’s portfolio. God’s answer, “I am who I am,” denies a handle by which a priest can manipulate God! Yes, we still use names for God. The Lord, Adonai, Elohim, Our Father, or simply God. The Jews use the four letters “YHWH” for this name. It is so holy that Jews do not pronounce it when reading the scripture. In English, we often pronounce this as “Yaweh.” An older pronunciation is “Jehovah”. “I am who I am.” This can be taken as a declaration that God’s name is above our comprehension. This god who meets Moses on holy ground at Mount Horeb is far different from all the other gods in Moses’s known universe.

With the benefits of hindsight, we can actually see good reasons why Moses was well chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt.

1. Moses was born a Hebrew, a child of Israel. And, he, like God, cared about the suffering of the Israelites in slavery; he had demonstrated that.

2. Moses was, by education, an Egyptian. He knew the protocols of the court. Since he had been of the household of Pharaoh, he knew something of administration, of justice, and of law. He also would have learned a bit of geography and of other empires, perhaps. At that time Palestine was under Egyptian rule, so he may even have become somewhat acquainted with the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. He would have had religious training. He may even have

had familiarity with the concept of monotheism, the idea that there was but one god, from the Pharaoh Akhenaten. An idea that was rejected in Egypt when later Pharaohs reinstated polytheistic worship.

3. Moses has spent a few dozen years as a Midianite. He knows the Sinai intimately. The Midianites were traders. They first appear in that role in the Joseph story earlier. Quite a different life from that of Egypt. The Egyptians were settled. They lived in cities and practiced agriculture along the Nile. The Midianites were nomadic traders, herdsman, and, interestingly enough, metalsmiths.

Most important, his father in law Jethro isn't just a Midianite; he is the Priest of Midian. Moses would surely have learned Midianite religious principles and practices. This religious connection was important. For, who were the Midianites? Midian was a son of Abraham! After Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah, and became the father of six additional sons. Midian was one of them. Midian's descendants became a nation that flourished for several hundred years. Their lifestyle, as we see from these readings, resembles that of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Very different from how the Israelites have lived in Egypt, most recently (but for quite a while) as slaves. The point is, The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God as the God of Abraham, Midian, and Jethro! Indeed, the Midianites probably have a closer association with God than the Hebrews do at this point! Later, Jethro comes to the camp at Mount Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt to meet Moses and the Israelites. He gives praise to God, YHWH, for what has happened.

And so it was, that this Moses, a failure from the point of view of humanity, but a savior in the plans of God, found himself standing on holy ground.

We can't know the details of how all of these things came together in the person of Moses. But we do know the result: The Exodus. The Ten Commandments. A new relationship between God and his Creation. A People of God, the Israelites. A people from whom we would receive the Law and the Prophets, holy writings, that tell God's Story. A people among whom would be born another special baby, Jesus of Nazareth. He would grow up to make known, in a new way, God's love for all of the people of His creation.

So, what does this delving into Moses's story mean for us? I'd like to put aside things you might easily think of concerning national identity, sojourning in foreign lands, and immigration. Think of Moses, the person's, situation. Have you, too, ever felt misidentified? Moses did. He tried to help his people in bondage, even at great personal risk, but his people rejected his identification as an Israelite.

Have you ever found yourself searching, trying to find a spiritual home, or maybe any kind of home? Moses did.

Have you ever wondered if your life has any purpose, or if you were simply to live out your days in a dull obscurity? Moses did.

Have you ever witnessed injustice or oppression, and thought, “Who am I to do anything about it?” Moses did. Even when he rose to act against injustice, to do something by his own power as a son of the daughter of Pharaoh, he found what he did was ineffective and failing. Has that happened to you, you did something about a wrong, only to have it fail and bounce back to hurt you? Moses knew about that.

But for all that, Moses found himself standing on holy ground. What he saw as failures, God saw as unique talents and qualifications for a special mission.

God has a history, His Story, of choosing and giving power and missions to people who, like Moses, seemed not to fit. Who were rejected. On that day in the wilderness, that insignificant nobody named Moses stopped to marvel at a strange manifestation of nature, the burning bush, and found himself standing on holy ground. In the New Testament, Jesus recognizes this:

**Matthew 21:42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’”**

Indeed, if you are building an ordinary wall, a keystone just doesn’t fit. But, it is the glory, the crown, of an arch.

Only very rarely has God called on someone to do something as earth-changing as the task given Moses. Moses needed a lot of persuading. God patiently answered each of Moses’s concerns and objections, and armed him with amazing signs and wonders.

God may, and surely does, have something for each of us. Maybe not as dramatic as the task given Moses. Perhaps as simple as acts of kindness, generosity, and love, lived out daily as a sign of God’s love for the world. Or maintaining faith and service amid a culture that rejects anything that is not self-elevating. Each one of us, as broken and imperfect as we may be, like Moses, treads the ground of God’s creation. We walk about, as in a garden, presented with the glories of the magnificent creation.

As we do that, if we are but open to God’s leading, we can find ourselves treading on holy ground. God has purpose and meaning for the lives of each one of us, though sometimes we can’t see it. We know from the promises of old, and especially as we have it from the words of Jesus, God is always with us. He beckons us to recognize that we stand on holy ground, and are called to holy purpose. We need but open our hearts to the one who is our Maker. And who is, through Jesus Christ, our teacher, example, redeemer, and friend.

Amen.