

February 28, 2016

Exodus 4.1-13

Exodus 5.15-6.7

It seems that even after everything that happened in our reading from last week, Moses is still not convinced. After hearing the name of God, Moses still wonders if the people will believe him when he comes, he doubts that he will even get them to listen to him, let alone spark belief. As Yahweh's messenger, Moses needs credentials, a voice that is not his own, a voice which can make the people listen, a voice which can silence his doubts and even make him believe. Moses has already received the name of God, the nonsensical name which breaks grammatical structures. But Moses needs more, he still longs for a voice more powerful than his own, a voice which does not stutter but a voice which has the power to create. He worries that when the people hear him speak they will only hear his small voice which stumbles and inspires nothing but pity.

So God gives Moses three miracles, which really resemble magic tricks more than anything else. First God tells Moses to throw down his staff, causing it to become a snake, becoming a staff again after he picked it up. Then God told Moses to put his hand inside his cloak, and when Moses removed it, his hand was leprous, white as snow. God immediately told Moses to put his hand back into his cloak, and when he removed it, his hand was restored like the rest of his body. God told Moses that if they do not heed the first sign, they may believe the second, but if they do not believe the first two signs, there is one final trick that can be used. God told Moses that if all else fails, draw some water from the Nile and pour it onto the dry ground, and it will become blood.

While these three signs may be impressive in their own way, they certainly do not display the power of the ten plagues to come, they may spark curiosity but I doubt that witnessing these few signs would cause faith to bloom in me. These signs do not compel faith and they do not banish doubt. These signs leave Moses seeming like an ordinary conjurer of the ancient world, a possible fraud even. So why does God give these signs to Moses? God surely knows the human heart, God knows what will make the people listen to His prophet, so why send Moses out with a nonsensical name and a few cheap parlor tricks, against the might of the Egyptians and the doubt of the human heart? There has to be something more.

It is because these tricks are not just for the people, they are for Moses. The text subtly implies that the rod Moses picks up is the staff of God, but undoubtedly Moses the shepherd carried his own rod into the scene. The rod that Moses carried with him to tend the flocks, the old and unimpressive staff of a poor desert shepherd becomes the staff of God. While remaining the simple staff of Moses, it becomes also the staff of God. This staff makes Moses not only one who speaks for God but one who acts for God. Moses, along with his ordinary staff, is restored from who he has become, a man with no power and no voice, to be someone who gives his powerless, and voiceless people, a voice, and the freedom to worship their God. Moses is restored from obscurity, as this shepherd's staff is made into the staff by which God will lead the people from their tortured lives into their own land. The staff which leads God's flock, the staff which parts the sea.

The man we find in Moses, is someone who has been deeply damaged by life, torn apart by what he has experienced. He is a Hebrew raised in the very family which tried to put him and his people to death, as a man cut off from his family and his people. The relationships that should have been the most meaningful, and formational, are taken away from him, and now he is a

wanted fugitive from the only family he ever knew. And now God is trying to send him back to a people who are as much strangers to him as the Midianites. He is a man who tried desperately to give justice to the people he was cut off from, killing the Egyptian, burying him in the sand. But Moses fails to achieve justice for his people or acceptance amongst his people. This action, which doubtlessly cut Moses deeper with each scoop of sand, did not give Moses a new family, a new people, instead he is forced into further isolation, further obscurity. Moses is a damaged man, living in a foreign land as a wanted man, trying to find his own identity, but unable to escape the brokenness that has led him to this alien land.

Moses is a man who has been deeply damaged, as we all have, we can all identify parts of our lives which have left us broken to pieces. Losses we have experienced, things we have witnessed, wrongs we have felt that we may try to hide under the surface, the parts of our lives which are in desperate need of healing, of restoration. Moses, like all of us, is a man who truly is as broken as his leprous hand. By making Moses put his hand in his cloak, to reveal the white leprous hand, God is confronting Moses with his own form of leprosy. Moses who covered up his damaged life with his new identity is forced to confront just how much he needs to be restored. But just as quickly as Moses reveals the leprous hand, God tells Moses to put it back into his cloak and his hand is restored. For all of the damage that Moses has undergone, he is restored. What is damaged and diseased in Moses, what is hurt and the parts that doubt, the parts which separate Moses from God and from his people, are restored. They are healed and made whole. Moses is healed and made whole.

And the final sign that God gives to Moses, the last sign to compel faith, is one that can only be performed in Egypt by going to the Nile. By going exactly where Moses does not want to go, and drawing the water from the river that gave him life, which meant death for so many of

his people. God tells Moses to pour the water out, the water which drowned so many infants, and it will become blood, which is life. As unimpressive as these signs are, they fulfill their purpose. These signs for Moses, restore him. Moses is now the one who acts for God, carrying the old shepherd's staff, the staff of God, who will lead the Hebrews towards God's restoration, to be a people who have voice, who can act. The damage and disease that has twisted Moses, is restored, it is healed by God, who alone can heal the deepest wounds of all, who alone can take an instrument of death and turn it into life.

And with that, Moses accepts Yahweh's right to command him. He calls God, "my Lord" and himself "your slave". Moses becomes the slave of God, the man who speaks and acts on the behalf of the One who commands him. But Moses still worries that the Word of God will turn into babble with his inarticulate speech. He worries that the Word of God will fall flat from his slow tongue. Moses accepts his position but he is still reluctant, even after the Lord promises to give Moses the words to say, Moses begs his Lord to send someone else. While God does allow Aaron to be the voice of Moses to the people, Moses is the one who has been restored, Moses is the one who will lead them towards God's restoration. Moses is the one who has been restored from his leprous self to guide the Hebrew people back to their restoration, back to their humanity from oppression, back to their restoration with the God who created them human, free to worship and enjoy their Creator.

So Moses goes, Moses goes to his people with Aaron and speaks the restoring Word of God to his people. Moses speaks this Word to them, who have been turned into objects by their enslavement, so they can be returned to the humanity given to them by the God who created them, restored to relationship with their God. But Pharaoh was not as keen on this plan. So he commands that the Israelites will not receive any straw to make their bricks. Moses was told to

restore these people to their God, but they do not have the means to create, to build. While the people may not have any straw to make bricks, Moses and Aaron have no straw to restore these objects used at the Pharaoh's disposal, in his good and bad odors, to their humanity. Moses and Aaron have no straw, no means to make something out of this nothing. They have no straw and yet God tells them to make bricks, bring Me a people, restored to worship and enjoy their Lord. So Moses calls out to God, asking the Lord why He ever sent him. Declaring that God has done nothing to deliver the people, has done nothing to restore them, has done nothing to turn this mound of dirt and mud into a person, into a brick which can build a nation.

God responds to Moses, declaring I am the Lord. I am the Lord who turned dirt into humanity, I am the Lord who can create bricks with no straw, I am the Lord who will restore this people broken down by their slavery to the humanity I created them to have, to the relationship I created them to have with their Creator. I am the Lord who creates from nothing. I am the Lord who will create from what you see as nothing, bricks, to build my people. God says to Moses, tell the Israelites that I am the Lord, and I will free you from your burdens and deliver you from your slavery. The Lord declares that the Israelites, this people who Moses sees as mud without straw, will be the Lord's people and He will be their God. He will not only be the Lord who wills their freedom, but will relate to them as their God. He will turn this mound of dirt who has no land, no wealth, into His people, and He will be their God. They will no longer be an enslaved rabble but will be a people, His people, with a home in God's grace. He will listen to their cries, He will love them, He will heal them, He will restore them, He will make them whole, because He will be their God.

This is the God who declares, I am the Lord, who will create a people restored out of the death of Jesus Christ. From His body which will lay completely devoid of life, this slab of mud

with no straw, I will restore my people. From this instrument of death, will flow life. From the body which had its humanity stripped like clothing, I will restore my people to the humanity I created them to have, no longer to be objects. From what is lifeless, I will give my people life. From the broken body of Christ, I will make my people whole. From Christ, abandoned by those closest to Him, I will restore my people to the relationship I intended to have them. From this pierced side, I will continue to pour out healing for my people, onto their deepest wounds. As we head towards Holy Week, this is the lifeless body we draw ever closer to, this is the body of the One who declares, I am the Lord, and I will be your God, I will love you and I will restore you. As we draw close to the body of our slain Lord, let us be restored, let our relationships be healed, let us be made whole.