

Herding Cats

sermon digest

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Exodus 33:11-23

larry dipboye

Turn the page. Exodus is only one page removed from the end of the Genesis story with the arrival of Jacob's family in Egypt, the blessing of the sons of Joseph, and the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers; but, as the story goes (Exodus 12:40), that page represents 430 years, a giant leap in time and circumstance. In the book of Exodus, Joseph was eventually forgotten. A Pharaoh arose who did not know or remember Joseph (1:8), and Jacob's family descended into slavery. Into the pit of Egyptian slavery Moses was born. He was miraculously spared the slaughter of Jewish children and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. With an Egyptian name *Moshe*, meaning son, Moses like Joseph before him became a prince in the household of Pharaoh. In defense of his birth family, he killed an Egyptian slave driver and took flight from Pharaoh's wrath to Midian. In Midian, Moses was called by God at the burning bush to lead the family of Israel, now a multitude, out of Egypt across the Sinai desert to the Land of Promise—the event we know as Exodus.

In the Bible Moses stands taller than any of the Patriarchs of Genesis. Not only does his story dominate both Exodus and Deuteronomy, he was credited by tradition with authorship of the entire Torah, the first five books of our Bible. Along with the Exodus event Moses stands at the very center of Jewish religion. Here Abraham's God of Covenant became known as Savior, the God who rescues people from slavery. Because the bulk of Jewish national history came to be the story of oppression by tyrants, the Redeemer role of JHWH moved to the center. Thus, the shadow of Moses was cast into the Christian story of Jesus-Yeshua-Savior. Matthew's Gospel is deliberate in portraying Jesus from the time of his birth as the new Moses, leader of the new Exodus, from the point of being spared the Bethlehem slaughter of innocents to ascending the mount to give a new Law of God.

Given the history of Israel, we would expect Moses to be bigger than life; but the Jewish mind seems intent on maintaining contact with the defective humanity of their heroes. In Judaism, a clear line is always drawn between the God we worship and the human hero we admire. So the story of Moses is also about a stumbling, stammering prophet, who resists God's call, pleads with God to be removed from leadership, throws temper tantrums along with the tablets of the Law, directly violates orders from above, and still has the audacity to ask the impossible, for a glimpse of God's glory. Yet, long before any Jewish expectation of a Messiah, Moses' role is messianic. He was a born leader. The Jews were convinced that he was born to lead his people across an unforgiving desert to a land flowing with milk and honey. But the geography is secondary. The primary story is a spiritual Exodus from bondage to freedom, from the meaningless despair of the past to the promised hope of the future.

Leaders need community. United Church of Christ Pastor, Anthony B. Robinson (*Christian Century*, Oct 4, 2005, 28-32) found a key to understanding the leadership responsibility of Moses in the work of Ron Heifetz of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He noted the distinction between experts and leaders: "Experts do things for us; leaders go with us."

Moses needed the people as much as the people needed Moses. The task of leading a nation is not so far removed from other leadership tasks: running a business, being President of a democracy, coaching a football team, or being pastor of a church. A business needs workers and clients, a democratic President needs the people, a coach needs a team, and a pastor needs the church. Of course, some leadership tasks are significantly better defined than others. The chain of command in a military structure demands recognition of rank and appropriate submission to authority.

As priest, Moses speaks to God in behalf of the people. He finds himself defending the people against the wrath of God. He succeeds in reminding JHWH of the promises of his Covenant and persuading God to turn away from destroying this "stiff necked people."

As prophet, Moses speaks for God to the people. The word of Moses and the word of God are the same. Moses seems to hold absolute power. He appears to be the commander of the people, the CEO of the organization, the voice of unquestionable authority over the nation. But he never quite gains the control that he claims. He is constantly trying to inspire repentance and call the people to reform, but his leadership role is limited to persuasion. Finally, the people must make a clear commitment to follow.

Elie Wiesel described the irritating situation: “Moses’ outbursts of anger, even his abdication are understandable. This people he had chosen never gave him anything but worries. There was no pleasing, no satisfying them. Forever complaining, grumbling, protesting, regretting the stability—however precarious, even miserable—of the past; the certainties—however debasing—of bondage” (*Messengers of God*, 196).

Community needs leadership. I first encountered the metaphor when I joined with other moderate Baptists to resist the emerging dominance of fundamentalism in our denomination. In conversation with other theologically moderate pastors, someone compared leading our independent-minded, community-oriented churches with “herding cats.” We immediately caught the significance of the metaphor. Cats are notorious for their independence. The Jim Davis cartoon “Garfield” is about a cat who not only manages to outsmart his owner, he obviously stands at the helm, running the entire house. You begin to get the picture when you compare Garfield’s style with Odie the dumb beagle who is constantly subject to manipulation by Garfield.

Although we complained about the authoritarian style of fundamentalist pastors, I found myself harboring envy for the authority to command the congregation. One of my favorite cartoons about church life was a drawing of a church building with smoke and flames beginning to rise from the roof. A voice from inside the building says, “The church is on fire.” Another voice follows, “Let’s call the fire department.” Sticking to Roberts’ Rules, another voice rises, “Is there a second?” Then, “The floor is open for discussion.” The efficiency of monarchy is always superior to community rule, but it does not always lead in the best direction. Monarchy says, “my way or the highway,” without consideration that any other way might exist or of the will and ability of the whole community.

Moses’ encounter with God is one of the more difficult passages in Exodus. The relationship is described as a friendship. Interpreters find the dialogue between Moses and God to be more like two disconnected monologs than a conversation. It follows the high moment, the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the low point, the apostasy of the people at the foot of the mountain in which Aaron yielded to the demand of the people for a visible god and cast a golden calf. Like God, Moses was furious with Aaron for yielding to the will of the people and angry with the people for demanding a god they could handle and control. However, the mystery of the hidden God was difficult for the people. Moses brought this very case before God: “you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.” This conversation led to a commitment from God, “My presence will go with you,” and a challenge from Moses, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.”

I tend to agree with Winston Churchill that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all of the alternatives. At every level of life, these days we are struggling with issues of authority and community. The simplest form of government in home, the church, the nation, or the universe is an absolute monarchy; but any student of history can see that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The more threatened our world becomes by natural disaster and global war, the more we are in need of leadership that will guide us through the storms and pitfalls of the Sinai desert. But it has to take into account the whole picture from top to bottom, from the wealthiest tycoon to the most impoverished child among us.