

## Fear Mongering and Faithful Living

Moses. Even those of us, like myself, who did not hear these biblical stories from the time of our youth, still likely know the name Moses. When I think of Moses, I picture, yes, you guessed it, a Moses from the movie “The Ten Commandments” with long red cloak and brown scraggly beard blowing in the wind, holding a long staff with arms upraised as he parts the Red Sea. Yes, I know well the movie made almost 20 years before I was born. For many years, this is all I knew of the Moses story – that part told to me by Cecile B. DeMille, Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner. And that story is delightfully exciting, filled with drama and anticipation of great events. But it has occurred to me as this picture has appeared in my mind again and again this week was how sad it would be if that was all I ever knew of the tale. Why? Because “The Ten Commandments” is more about one great man and leader of the faithful than it is about the journey of faith that he went through. The journey begins in the text we have heard today and it includes includes his parents, the Pharaoh, a princess, his sister, two women (who really have no direct connection to Moses) and, yes, even us. Today we hear a Moses story that teaches us about fear, longing, love and freedom.

Our story begins years after the death of Joseph. Joseph, as David told us last week, had been called “the Savior of the People.” Yet, somehow, his title, his faith, his prestige among the Egyptians has been forgotten. The people that he helped save from famine have indeed survived and thrived, for generation after generation. And now there is a new king, a new sherrif in town, who knows nothing of Joseph, and therefore has no personal knowledge of Joseph’s people. He sees them only for what they are at face value, a prolific people who outnumber the Egyptian ruling class. He sees them as a threat, not necessarily against him directly, but against the will and power of his own rule as the Pharaoh. And this causes him to be a little afraid. In his first effort to quell this small fear, he tries to weaken the Hebrews by asking the Egyptian people to force the them into hard labor. I imagine that his hopes are to crush their spirits so that their strength in faith and family is weakened by their burden of labor.

It seems that it did not work. As Pharaoh’s fear escalates, he asks two midwives to the Hebrews, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all of the male babies born to the Hebrews. His fear spurred more dramatic action, the death of the Hebrew men, almost before they are even allowed to live. Yet, Shiphrah and Puah have a fear of their own – they fear God. This fear outweighs any fear they may have of the wrath of the Pharaoh and causes them to go against his will. Pharaoh’s fear reaches a fever pitch, and he calls on all the people, in fact this time he *commands* them, to throw all the male children into the Nile – a drastic and dramatic order – meant to create a fear that, even though he may not know it, is as big as his own.

If you try to see logic in his action, you will fail. He is not acting logically. If you are trying to use forced labor to build new cities, to support the work of your people, why would you kill off all of the men, those who would likely become the strongest of the people, and keep the women alive? If the men were dead, who would work and make the kingdom great? Why? The answer is simple – but it is not logical. The Pharaoh makes decision from a place of fear, and fear is not logical. He allows his fear to escalate so much that he defeats his own purposes. When the midwives give him the excuse that the Hebrew people are more hearty – which is, let’s face it, a pretty lame excuse – the Pharaoh’s fear takes over and pushes him to an inane act of violence against a whole race and gender. Fear can be, and often is debilitating to the person experiencing it, and unfortunately, it is only after that fear has subsided that they understand the true ramifications of decisions made in that state. And as the story goes along we discover that Pharaoh has made one very clear mistake, because it is not the men who will in the end thwart his plans, but the women whom he allowed to live.

Now these women, they have a different kind of fear altogether. The scripture tells us that Shiphrah and Puah fear God. Pharaoh’s fear was one of concern and anxiety. Their fear is of the alternate definition – a fear that is the response to awe in something greater, more beautiful and more loving than they. Pharaoh’s fear made him behave defeatingly, some might say it make him weak. The midwives’ fear is something different, their fear made them strong enough to disobey a deceitful order, thus saving multitudes of children and providing inspiration for others to performing saving acts as well. Two women, small events, small decisions – these combined made great things possible. They may have seen it as the saving of a few small children, but we are able to see its future in the saving of a people. Moses can live simply because they created the possibility for others to thrive.

This possibility allows Moses’ family to consider hiding Moses, to let him live when others say he should die, to place him in the hands of God by putting him in the cradle in the water and see where God leads. I’d like to share with you that we spent quite a bit of time in our staff bible study this week considering whether or not Moses’ mother and sister contrived to have Moses saved by the Pharaoh’s daughter, or whether they simply did the best they could and held onto the faith that God would take care of him. Did they know that Pharaoh’s daughter would come by?

They may have, but how would they have known that she would have compassion enough for him to pick him up and make him her own (against – I might remind you – the Pharaoh’s strict orders)? Or did they just hope, and watch, and pray for the best. We don’t really know, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it doesn’t really matter. Both ways of telling the story come to the same idea – that Moses’ family had both kinds of fear, the fear for the life of their child, and had reverential faith and hope that, somehow, God’s will would be done to keep him safe, even if they had to help God along. Stephen Montgomery tells us that “...Hope comes, not from the emperor, the scribe, the master technocrat, or the high priest, but rather from the God who works in and through historical anguish.”<sup>1</sup>

Freedom from all types of oppression begins with liberation from debilitating fear. It would be easy for me to continue on today with words about how we should help the poor, the marginalized and the helpless. And indeed we should, but that is not what this scripture is about. Looking at the feelings and hurts of others is sometimes easier than looking to our own needs. This scripture is about overcoming the type of fear that causes our own paralysis in action – liberation from that fear allows us to see the possibilities for God’s good work to be done in our own lives. Liberation from fear offers us hope – and love – for ourselves for our family, and for this whole earth. In that hope we are liberated from the expectations placed upon us by others (and ourselves) and are offered the freedom of following God. The God calls to you and to me and who yearns for each one of us to know the intimacy found in God’s presence.

As we sang in our middle hymn, God’s supporting breath drives all our fears away. Can you feel that breath? Can God’s house be our home? Yes, it can. And I have a secret – it already is. God is always calling us, the wayward children, home. Are you afraid of making that journey, just because you haven’t already seen what the exact destination is?

What do you fear? Do you fear failure at work or failure at home? Do you worry about what may happen in the next storm or the next flood? Do you pray, and feel nothing, and worry that you will never feel God’s love again? Do you live with so much doubt in so many things that faith seems a distant light that is barely able to be seen in the fog? Do you feel like Moses in the reeds, protected by the cradle, but bouncing restlessly among the flow of the river and dancing in and out among the reeds? I grew up near such a river, and I can tell you, there is a peacefulness to the ebb and flow of the life found there. Yet sometimes objects bounce around for too long, getting caught up in the violence of the moment, the tossing, turning and swirling of the stream. But, eventually, they are usually let go, or sometimes thrown out of that place to go further down the stream. A river is always still just a stream, it flows whether you are in the center of it or at the margins, and you never know where you will get caught up. But, it does go on, it does eventually, naturally, navigate you back on track. And a river’s edge is changed by the seasons of flood and draught, but its direction never changes.

Such is the love of God, leading us along the way, helping us out of the bog, or pushing us out when we can’t find our own way. God’s streams of truth, grace and love call to us in moments of joy and sorrow. It is true that in traveling along that stream, our path can be shaped by the actions of others, but that shaping does not define the margins and direction of the river. God has already done that, and we have climbed into a boat to take our own journeys. Sometimes the journeys will be smooth, and sometimes we will encounter rapids, and we try to make the best of it. Sometimes we get wet, sometimes we stay dry, but we can still find peace on the river. Shiphrah and Puah teach us that small course corrections can make all the difference.

In upcoming weeks, as we travel through Exodus, we will hear the rest of this great tale and we will learn that for the people of the Hebrews, “freedom from human domination meant freedom for God’s presence and God’s leading.”<sup>2</sup> I encourage you to remember that we are hearing a people’s struggle with God’s three-fold promise given to Abraham. God promised the people of Abraham that they would be a great nation – and this, we hear from Pharaoh, they have indeed become. They are now waiting for the second part, the promise of dominion over the land. I think it is safe to say that it is not happening as the Hebrews might have expected. So here they begin to be shaped by the pilgrim’s journey, a journey defined by distance and by faith.

Their pilgrim journey is and will be our “Pilgrim” journey. As Christians, we need to know this story – we need to own it. If we hold this story as our own, we know that part of its purpose is to help us remember what it is like to be a part of the promise of God. It helps us recognize and remember that we have the freedom to be God’s people – that our feelings of fear pale in comparison to the call and power of faith. Our story today began with the people of God in slavery, and will eventually end in their freedom to worship and follow God in safety and in faith – to let God lead them. When we tell this story, and the stories in weeks to come, we can remember that we here today do not have to suffer “fear and trembling”. There is always hope. We have the privilege to feel the liberation from all that keeps us from holding God closest to our own minds and hearts. May we all walk in that knowledge, and in that faith, and may we feel it in our hearts in every moment of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Montgomery, "Beyond Fear, Fundamentalism and Fox News: the Active Hope of Advent," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2005 (Vol. 29, No. 1.), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Yoder, "Liberated by Law," *Sojourners Magazine*, September/October 1999 (Vol. 28, No. 5), p. 46.  
Living the Word.