

A Law Giver is Born

Let's talk about Moses. I don't believe I have ever preached a sermon on his birth narrative, or given it much attention. So it has been just lovely rereading it and getting acquainted with a story we often tell our children in Sunday School but to which we never paid much serious attention.

I have with me this morning something I didn't have at hand the last time I spoke to you about Moses.

Before we come to the birth of Moses, let's review a bit where our romp through the ancestor stories has brought us to this point, and what are the basic things we have learned?

The themes that we are going to see in the story of Moses' birth are not new in the ancestor narratives so far. There is brinkmanship, that is, God stepping in at the last minute to avert the shipwreck of his long determined plan for his people.

There is barrenness, family strife, exile, famine, slavery, betrayal. All of these dangers hath God's path traveled.

Even in the face of all of these dangers, God continues to be present in the world and operating invisibly, behind the visible. We have learned that we, as people of faith, believe this to always be the case, a tremendous assurance of 'God with us' in life.

And that he brings **good** out of **evil**: Joseph sold into slavery, enslavement in Egypt as a means of expanding the population, and that although humans conspire to thwart God's purpose, they never succeed.

As we see these large narrative themes across the arc of the story, we have learned, above all, that we are asked to walk in faith, and that in spite of the oft hiddenness of God's working, God is nevertheless faithful to his promise and his people.

Years, centuries, a thousand generations cannot diminish his Presence nor subvert his **timeless** purposes. This is El Shaddai, God Almighty. The great I AM.

And we are never to think that God is subject to our mere perception of his Presence, for he is eternal and beyond all that we can see. Put another way, you may not know it or feel it, but it is nonetheless true.

Some historical background to this story: the time of the Exodus is between the 18th (Seti 1) and 19th Egyptian dynasties we think, roughly 1300 years before Jesus, in the time of Rameses II, the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

As you probably know, not everyone thinks the Bible is always a reliable record of history. Many do not. Outside of the Bible there is no independent historical evidence about the early history of the Israelites. No Egyptian annals speak of the Israelites neither in slavery nor of the Exodus, or

of Moses. Nor would you expect the Egyptian historians to preserve what was a defeat of the Egyptian god Pharaoh and his deities. I'm not surprised it doesn't appear in Egyptian record.

The earliest and only extra-biblical reference to the "Israelites" is in the Stele of Merneptah c1204 BCE: one word in line 27 of the Stele, referring to a people in Canaan.

With the Exodus and 2-300 years of conquest of Canaan and the period of the Judges it brings us to the easily remembered idea that the monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon) begins about a 1000 years before Jesus.

In the Text

Each of the two testaments in the Bible is introduced by a birth narrative. Moses' birth introduces the Age of the Law and Jesus' birth narrative introduces the Age of the Messiah. We have been observing that they are one story.

BTW Eric...

Moses is the **founder** of the story of Israel, the Age of the Law, and the Exodus defines this people. His story, his charisma is the basis for the history of Israel. "Without [Moses] the [story of Israel] is inconceivable" (see W. Eichrodt, ABD, Vol 4 p911).

Here is something that makes his emergence such a powerful advent. Because, it is clear to me, in rereading this story, that the enslaved nation did not know their God. He has two names at this stage, YHWH, El Shaddai. But other than the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and circumcision (Gen 17:10-14) there was nothing to bind this people to a God. In what would their confession consist? Some vague, long disappointed promise?

And against 400 years of slavery, in the absence of **any evidence** of their God's power or loving care whatsoever, their faith in Him would have been little comfort in such a hostile world as they dwelt. They might well have said that droll comment, 'Next time maybe you could choose someone else?'

At this point the Israelites are enslaved and building the **supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh**. (Ex 1:11)

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. (Ex 2:23-24)

When God called out Moses much later in his life, as a shepherd in Midian, and sent him back to Egypt to rescue his people, Moses says ***"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." Say to them I AM has sent you.*** (Ex 3:13-14)

Moses told the enslaved Israelites that this heretofore unknown God had taken a renewed interest in them **...they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery** (Ex 6:9).

It was to a lost and forgotten people that this Hebrew boy was born. It is against this backdrop that we are to understand the emergence of Moses.

Let me observe a few things about Moses' birth.

We didn't read vs 1:8-21 this morning because it was a bit long, but the Egyptian midwives, assisting the Hebrew women, were instructed **if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."** **But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.** (1:16-17)

The Egyptian women are the heroes of this birth narrative. When called to account before Pharaoh they say, 'Oh... we got there too late. These Hebrew women are robust, they deliver quickly' (Ex 1:19).

There is this instructive juxtaposition of the lowly and the good over against the corruption of the powerful. **That tells me how God works.** Remember Joseph and Mary with the henchmen of Herod in pursuit? They **flee to Egypt** (Mt 2:13) Jesus is born into the same hostile administrative environment, the rulers attempting to kill babies who threaten their power.

Another hero is the daughter of Pharaoh who rescues the baby in a basket floating in the papyrus, she and her maids, who take compassion on this beautiful baby, knowing that he is a Hebrew. What we see here is the futility of the attempts of power to subvert good – in the long run. In our story of the Bible good always overcome evil, even though evil oft has its day.

I want us to understand the immensity of the importance of this child in the stream of God's plan, in the long shadow of the promise to Abraham that he would raise up a people and give them land. And this child... this child set adrift in a river in a frail basket tarred with bitumen, floating into the bathing area of the Egyptian women in a desperate attempt to save his life. This is salvation history.

Moses' unnamed sister made sure to be close at hand to offer assistance. We later meet her in Ex 15:20 and she is described as the prophet Miriam, who sang... **I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea...**

Moses cv? He is raised in Pharaoh's court, educated as an Egyptian, yet with a passion for those suffering under Pharaoh's cruel hand. Did he know he was in fact Hebrew? The Bible doesn't really say. But it's hard to see how he could have even known, except perhaps he had been circumcised? But I doubt his parents would have done that it being a death sentence for the baby.

Consider his path. He arose from abandonment in the papyrus reed beds of the Nile, through the desert of liberation, to the pinnacle of the Mountain of God where he received the Law for the People of Israel.

From the Text

There is so much that ministers to us from understanding this arc of history.

What do we learn from this story? God's way cannot be, will not be unfulfilled. It shall be fulfilled. Had it not been fulfilled the story would have ended right there, and you and I wouldn't be sitting in this virtual sanctuary. We learn that the lowly and the good can subvert and overwhelm the power of evil.

By way of particular application, let me say that Chrissy and I just celebrated 46 years of marriage. Going on 5 decades of life in the hope of our faith. And you gain perspective those years. Sometimes we wander away, sometimes come back, but God is always there, unchanged, loving, open arms, forgiveness. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the most poignant story I know. You get know that over time it is going to be alright.

But if you are among the young, and most of life's big rocks aren't yet in place; will I have a partner? Who will it be? Where will I live? What will my career be? Here is a word for you. Just know... just know... that God will never or forsake you. The Bible tells us that you can go to the bottom of the ocean, in the belly of a whale, but God knows where you are and you can't get away.

And though far may your travels take you, God will be your constant guide and solace. You are blessed among all people if you understand who God is early in your life. Rejoice.

Benediction:

And now may the God who delivered his son Moses from the reeds, who threw the horse and rider in the sea, who reveals himself without any shadow of turning or diminished by time, bless you and keep you now and forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen