

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Exodus 2:11-17

Rev. Tyler Amundson

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Bottoming Out

Exodus 2:11-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹¹ One day after Moses had become an adult, he went out among his people and he saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. ¹² He looked around to make sure no one else was there. Then he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

¹³ When Moses went out the next day, he saw two Hebrew men fighting with each other. Moses said to the one who had started the fight, “Why are you abusing your fellow Hebrew?”

¹⁴ He replied, “Who made you a boss or judge over us? Are you planning to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?”

Then Moses was afraid when he realized: They obviously know what I did. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard about it, he tried to kill Moses.

But Moses ran away from Pharaoh and settled down in the land of Midian. One day Moses was sitting by a well. ¹⁶ Now there was a Midianite priest who had seven daughters. The daughters came to draw water and fill the troughs so that their father’s flock could drink. ¹⁷ But some shepherds came along and rudely chased them away. Moses got up, rescued the women, and gave their flock water to drink.

If you have ever been swimming, or placed your whole-self underwater you will know what I am about to talk about. Do you remember that moment just before you reach the surface? Your lungs are screaming out for air. Your heart is hopeful to be in a comfortable environment again. You can see the light glistening through the surface. Then you

break the surface of the water and it is like connection, order, life has been restored to your whole-self. You breath in that air, your lungs fill up, your heart slows and a moment of peace endures for at least a second.

This month we are going to be studying hope as a people of God. We are going to be examining what hope is as the foundation of faith. We are going to understand how hope is not a method, but it is a foundation. We are going to examine how hope is living life with confident expectation: in God, in love, in Christ, in resurrection and in connection.

Amidst the backdrop of our world right now...we are going to both need to learn about hope and live it this month. Hope lived out allows us to be brought low for our God, deep into our very God created being, so that we can go out and love others as God loves us and as we are to love ourselves.

First we need to talk about Moses...

Now we all need to be very honest. Many of us got our understanding of Moses from Charlton Heston's appearance in *The Ten Commandments*. I have to admit at first I only knew this version, watching it on Easter Sunday weekend on broadcast TV. However, the Biblical account has a deeper story for us.

Remember Moses is a Jewish born slave, who is seemingly rescued, though actually hidden and found by an Egyptian woman. The Egyptian woman unknowingly asks Moses' mother a Hebrew woman to be his nanny. So, from the beginning Moses is adopted into privilege and forever destined to be a child of two competing worlds. The world of money and power, and the world of God's children.

When we find Moses today he is grown up. He has begun to see the awful conditions under which his people are treated each day. Death is common for his people, imprisonment is common, execution is common, and at best forced labor is the standard by which most live. A

few of his people have some privilege, but their families have paid dearly for it.

Moses grows frustrated by how his people are treated, it does not seem right. And in a moment of peak frustration he does what seems right to stop how his people are being treated. He kills a slave master, and Egyptian who is ruthlessly and opening enforcing the rules of the worldly kingdom of Egypt, and Pharaoh's law. He kills an Egyptian, and does he proudly do it, as if it would make it any better. No, he does it and then hides the body in the sand, hoping no one saw it.

The next day he is out amongst his people. He sees two of his brothers, Jews as well, fighting with each other. He goes to stop it and they say, "Who are you? Has anyone made you a boss over me?" Then they something that both terrifies Moses and steals any hope he may have had that his actions the day before did any good. "Are you going to kill me, like you did that Egyptian?"

In that moment Moses realizes he is trapped in the worst parts of both his worlds. He is a killer and unable to connect as a child of God.

When have you felt like that in your life? I know I have had moments, where like Moses I feel have done something potentially helpful, but find out in so doing I have harmed myself and the world more than I thought. I have tried to impose my will on others or on life and in so doing left out any potential of God actually working in the situation.

Parker Palmer calls this "functional atheism." A notion he names as having permeated religion and may be the biggest cause of younger generations seeing hypocrites in the church and avoiding religious institutions. At "functional atheisms" worst people act like Moses taking problems in our own hand and causing death. At our worst we say religious niceties to peoples actual problems and in so doing cause other forms of death. "Functional atheism" is acting like we believe

God will act with us, but instead of really leaning into that we take things into our own hands.

Parker Palmer claims it is why congregations across the United States can only handle about 15 seconds of silence. We feel we must say or do something for something to actually be accomplished.

In our political world today people claiming to be God fearing humans are really “functional atheists.” Progressive Christians who swoop in to fix problems in our world and think all they need to do is show up for a few days and protest, assume it will all be fixed by their ranting. Conservative Christians who act as things are ok for all people, equality has been achieved, and that everyone's bootstraps are long enough. To both these groups the Biblical text screams out...”your life and body are required for hope and change.”

Back to Moses...

Moses flees into the desert, the wilderness. Some might call this cowardice, and in some ways it is. However, in some ways this is the bravest thing Moses could do. Instead of pushing deeper on his own, he is inviting God’s creation to be a part of his journey.

Now I would guess a guy who grew up in a palace, probably had some challenges wandering away from all his checking accounts, credit cards, and into the unknown country. People were probably kind, but Moses would have been a wandering human. There were moments of freedom, but I am sure there were mostly moments of feeling like he was down and out. Grappling with killings someone, and being rejected by those he thought he was helping. We know Moses grappled with killing someone because later in the commandments not killing would make the top 5.

I would guess Moses said things like we have said in our darkest moments, things the Psalmists share in our scripture like:

Psalm 22:2 Common English Bible (CEB)

²My God, I cry out during the day,
but you don't answer;
even at nighttime I don't stop.

Psalm 13:1 Common English Bible (CEB)

13 How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

Clearly he survives his internal grappling and initial entrance into the wilderness because eventually he ends up at a well. Where some ruffians harass some women caring for a flock. Moses steps in and protects the women while they get water for their flock. In return he meets his wife and future family and begins a humble country life, but still his wound remains from his mistake in Egypt.

There is a story I heard that goes this way:

Once upon a time the devil was determined to get into heaven. To achieve this, he disguised himself as Jesus. That way, he felt sure, no one would dare to refuse him access to heaven. That would be unthinkable.

Now it happened that on the day in question St Peter was away on heavenly business and St Thomas had been left in charge of immigration. St Thomas, you will remember, was the disciple who doubted Jesus' resurrection, and insisted on seeing Jesus' wounds before he would be convinced.

Well, things were quiet at check-in when the devil appeared, looking for all the world like the risen Jesus. Thomas duly stopped him at the pearly gates and after a few minutes of careful consideration he refused him entry.

When the other disciples heard what had happened they were horrified. “How could you have refused to let Jesus into heaven?” they demanded. “That wasn’t Jesus,” he replied with calm conviction. “It was the devil.”

“But it looked exactly like Jesus,” they retorted. “How could you be so sure?” “The devil has no wounds,” said Thomas quietly.¹

After Moses begins his life as a country shepherd, we don’t know much about Moses’ life in the dessert, but some years do pass. Clearly for Moses God keeps nudging him to remember the two worlds he lived in before his time in the country. He remembers the world of money and power, and the world of God’s children being enslaved.

Though Moses has found a new life, he begins to feel down on himself as he continues to know his people are stuck in a place of death. My guess is he can hear the groan and pain of his people, as much as God. However, Moses is low and feeling helpless to offer change.

Then one day he sees a shimmering light on the hillside. The ripple of hope for an entire people who are gasping for air. He approaches the light and sees a bush burning, but not really burning. He approaches the burning bush, not sure if he remembers or even knows what the shimmering light represents.

Then he hears a voice, “Moses, Moses.”

¹ *The Devil in Disguise*, Silf, Margaret. One Hundred More Wisdom Stories (p. 152). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

Moses does the only thing he can do, the only thing most of us would do in a moment when hear a voice calling us toward hope, and life. He responds, “I am here.”

Then God asks Moses to do something I think he dreads, because as low as he has gone, he hasn't gone down to the ground of his being. Moses in many ways ran away from something in himself when he left Egypt, after his mistake he was convinced it was a bad part of himself. God says in this moment, “It was not a bad part that you acted from, you just acted without me. We need to do this big thing together, and I will give you the strength to help an entire people find hope.”

God says, “Moses take off your shoes, you are on Holy Ground.”

Moses has to be screaming inside his skull. “God, no, don't make me do that. I know I have been walking on Holy Ground. I know I have been so close to understanding what you were asking me to do, when I made my mistake. I know that I must own my history as painful as it is, if I am to be made new. I know I have to take off my shoes to really see where the devil in my life has tricked me into letting the wrong savior into my life.”

And Moses does the most faithful thing he can do...he takes off his shoes. And in that instant he sinks and at the same time he burst through the surface and takes the first breath of hope for his people.

Moses then gets to know the God who is the “I Am.” A God that is in the world and gives us purpose from the day we are born. A true self the world tries to burry with confusing objects and things we think we need. A true self that is covered over by race, class, gender, stereotypes and greed.

A God that will set us all free if we can trust we are children of God, everyone else is a child of God, and that Christ is in those who are wounded, not those who are the strongest.

Moses is wounded, and he knows it. Does he arrogantly go off to free his people, no he resists. He resists until God gives him Aaron to speak for him. He resists over and over, and God, even in Moses' resistance, chooses to work through Moses. Just like God will choose to work through us, and will patiently wait until we are ready.

Here is the thing friends we have been deceived to believe God is about being the strongest, bravest and rightest person. Anyone who holds up the Bible and claims strength, must not know that anyone who really lives in the story of God is brought low first.

Hope is a choice
Hope is hard
Hope comes from our wounds.
Hope comes from God.

Please join me in a prayer from Psalm 40:1-3 Common English Bible (CEB)

For the music leader. Of David. A psalm.

40 I put all my hope in the Lord.

He leaned down to me;

he listened to my cry for help.

²He lifted me out of the pit of death,

out of the mud and filth,

and set my feet on solid rock.

He steadied my legs.

³He put a new song in my mouth,

a song of praise for our God.

Many people will learn of this and be amazed;

they will trust the Lord.