

SERMONS ON EXODUS III: “A SIGNIFICANT AND SHATTERING JOURNEY”

[Read Ex. 2:11-15a]

Our text begins by saying simply, “One day, when Moses had grown up” Isn’t it strange that, apart from his birth, his adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter and his naming which we considered last week, that is all that the Book of Exodus has to say about early life of the founder of the nation of Israel. I mean, he was the adopted grandson of Pharaoh, raised in the splendor of one of the great ancient cultures of the world, a man whose life story is incomparable, and, despite the curiosity that those facts would naturally raise for any reader, the author simply says, “One day, when Moses had grown up.” Philo, the philosopher, and, Josephus, the historian, great Jewish scholars both, have lots to tell us about Moses’ education by the best tutors in the world in all areas of ancient knowledge, and how he soon outstripped them all. They tell of his military training and heroic exploits, and much, much more, and these are the most careful of scholars, not given to inventing stories. So why does the Book of Exodus not tell us anything except that he grew up? Because Exodus is not about Moses except insofar as he is the instrument of God for his revelation of himself and his redeeming of his people. So the author is telling us, “Put all idle questions out of your mind. I’m about to tell you what is really important.”

“One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens.” What is meaningful is not the palace in which he was raised nor the royal family of which he was part, but that at a certain time Moses went out, looked upon his people and ‘saw’ their burdens. When you read these chapters attentively you can’t help but notice how often and with what depth of meaning the verb ‘to see’ is used. When Moses was born, his mother ‘saw’ that he was a goodly child, ‘saw’, took in the full significance of this fact and the surrounding circumstances, and took measures to save him. Pharaoh’s daughter found the basket among the reeds, opened it, and ‘saw’ the babe crying, took pity on it and acted to save it. We are quickly moving to the scene at the burning bush where God will tell Moses, “I have ‘seen’ the affliction of my people

who are in Egypt.” In each of these cases there is a seeing that is a deeply emotional beholding and caring, and involves such compassion as leads of necessity to saving action. There is, however, one occurrence of the verb ‘to see’ in these chapters that is radically different. It is when Pharaoh tells the midwives that when they serve a Hebrew woman giving birth and “see” upon the birthstone that it is a baby boy, they are to kill him. This kind of seeing is a cold, hard, disinterested—we could say ‘cold blooded’—seeing, an unseeing seeing. We know very well that there are different kinds of seeing, and we might rightly infer from our text that it would be a good thing for us to ask ourselves with what kind of eyes we see those around us. In fact, isn’t that just what the parable of the Good Samaritan is about? Wasn’t the Samaritan the only one who really ‘saw’ the beaten man by the side of the road?

With a few carefully chosen words our text tells us that at some critical point Moses looked upon his people, ‘his’ people, he who had never known their lot but to the contrary had lived in the lap of luxury, not only as a son of privilege, but, some have conjectured, a possible heir to the throne. This seeing of the people and knowing them to be his people and beholding their burdens changed him utterly. I had provisionally entitled this sermon “The ‘Incarnation’ of Moses,” “Incarnation” in quotation marks of course, for it wasn’t really, and yet it parallels the incarnation remarkably, for with this ‘seeing’ of his people in bondage Moses immediately, mentally, “existentially,” left the glories of the palace and became one with his people. Sholem Asch in his wonderful fictional telling of the story, has Moses telling the princess, his adoptive mother, of his newly discovered concern for his people, to which she responds:

“What wouldst thou do now, my son?”

“I would go to my brothers and be among them.”

“One more drop in the ocean of Egypt’s slavery?” she asked anxiously.¹

“One more drop in the ocean of Egypt’s slavery.” Yes, that is a picture of incarnation, but I decided a better title, one less open to misinterpretation, was to be found in André Neher’s description, “A significant and shattering journey.” To get the full weight of his description, we need to back up for the context. He wrote,

Educated and protected as he was at the court of Pharaoh, Moses escaped the fate of the Hebrews. He might have continued a long time living like

¹ Sholem Asch, *Moses*, tr. by Maurice Samuel (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), p. 35.

an Egyptian, like a Jew assimilated and privileged, to all appearances like other men. But suddenly his Jewish conscience strikes him, as the Bible says in a few trenchant words: ‘When Moses was grown up, he went out unto his brethren’ (Exod. 2:11). A significant and shattering journey. In an atmosphere of filth, sweat and blood Moses recovers his Jewishness.²

He adds, “By such an expression Moses has become the most familiar friend of the twentieth century Jew.”³

The noted Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, in an essay written a hundred years ago, spoke similarly of the need for such a ‘seeing’, for such an identification with the suffering brethren, in his day:

Those people out there—the miserable, stooped people dragging their feet, peddling their wares from village to village, not knowing where tomorrow’s livelihood will come from nor why they should go on living, and those dull, nearly stupefied masses, being loaded aboard ship, not knowing whereto or why—we shall perceive them, all of them, not merely as our brothers and sisters; rather, made secure within himself, every one of us will feel: these people are part of myself. It is not together with them that I am suffering; *I* am suffering these tribulations. My soul is not by the side of my people; my people *is* my soul.⁴

That was Moses’ experience. It was “a significant and shattering journey,” and it changed not only Moses but the whole history of the people of God, ours included. That experience, captured in so few words in the Book of Exodus, is spelled out more fully in the New Testament Book of Hebrews and held up to us as an exemplary act of faith. There we read,

By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

(Heb. 11:24-26)

Note carefully the wording: “[Moses] considered abuse *suffered for the Christ* greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.” Brevard Childs points out that the Book of Hebrews does not say that Moses chose to suffer with his people *as* Christ would later choose to suffer for them. “Rather,” he says, “the phrase indicates an actual participation

² André Neher, *Moses and the Vocation of the Jewish People*, tr. Irene Marinoff (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1959), pp. 23-25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴ “Judaism and the Jews” in Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 20.

by Moses in Christ's shame in the same way as the saints who follow Christ later also share [in his suffering] (cf. Heb. 10.33; 13.13)."⁵ Here we need to recall something we have seen before, something that may seem strange to us who are inclined to see events in a strictly historical way where things in the Old Testament may point to things in the New but not actually participate in them, but remember how St. Paul related the two when he wrote, for instance, referring to the very events of the Old Testament with which we are about to deal, "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the same supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10:1-4). It is not surprising then that the Book of Hebrews should see Moses, in the text before us today, as answering the call to discipleship of Christ, even as you and I must, and do.⁶

We must rush through the rest of the story. It is told briefly and is familiar enough. Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and, enraged, he immediately acts out of his sense of identification with his people and kills the Egyptian. He had 'seen' his people's burdens and that kind of seeing leads of necessity to action, whether the right action or not is another question. But the deed done in secret, so he thought, had been observed, and the next day when he saw two Hebrews fighting and tried to intervene, the aggressor turned on him and demanded, "Who made you to be our judge?" It was a poignant question for which Moses had no answer, for he was acting out of his own instincts and sense of outrage, not with divine authority. As a result his actions were not only futile, but counter-productive, as are ours when we suppose that we by ourselves are sufficient for the task. "Unless the Lord build the house"

The New Testament reflects on this event as well. St. Stephen, in the sermon that led to his martyrdom, traces at length and in some detail, the rebellious history of Israel, a "stiff-necked people," he called them," that "always resists the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51).

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 37.

⁶As Brevard Childs put it, "Seen from one perspective, the issue is black and white, unequivocal in its character, the clear call to discipleship" (*Ibid.*, p. 43).

He included in his list of willful acts this event, where, he said, “When [Moses] was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged” (Acts 7:23 ff.). Stephen continues the rest of the story and sees in the retort of the aggressor, “Who made you our judge?” yet another illustration of the long history of a stiff-necked people—and they were. And we are! We will come upon repeated instances their rejection of God’s deliverer.

Moses ends up fleeing from Egypt and from his brethren. He befriends and is befriended by the priest of Midian and his daughters, is given one of them in marriage and begets a son whom he names ‘Gershom’, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land” (Ex. 2:25). You get a distinct feeling of melancholia. The name, Gershom, is almost a lament.

So we have come to a climactic moment, to *the* climactic moment, to the turning point. A prince ends up shepherding sheep for his father-in-law. The presumed deliverer has fled into exile. He who rejected the honors of Egypt to identify with his enslaved brethren is rejected by them as well. He whose home was a palace ends up, as he says, “a sojourner in a foreign land,” a sojourner, though he mightn’t have thought of it, like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. For Moses and for his people, things could not have appeared more dismal, but the time of their deliverance was dawning. In the very closing verses of the chapter we read,

In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.

(Ex. 2:23-25)

The people ‘groaned’ and ‘cried out’, and God ‘heard’, and ‘remembered’, and ‘saw’ and ‘knew’.

The question arises, Why did God wait so long?—or better, why *does* God wait so long?—a question we often ask. Why did he wait until Abraham and Sarah were far beyond their years before giving them a child? Why did he keep Abraham and Isaac and Jacob wandering all that time in the land that was promised them but which they never possessed? After saving Jacob’s family from famine through the instrumentality of

Joseph, why did he keep them in Egypt? And why for 430 years—that's like from the time of Queen Elizabeth until today? And why did he allow the Israelites, who were not a conquered people, to be enslaved? And why did he allow the slavery to become so harsh?

Why? Why? Why? No one can answer for God but God, but we must have observed that he often waits until we turn fully to him and him alone as our hope and send our cries before his throne. Or as regards Moses, as someone said, "Clearly God looks for total emptying before he can use a man as his instrument."⁷ But the truth is, God doesn't wait. He has been working all along. He gave the midwives courage and conviction. He inspired the idea of the ark. He sent Pharaoh's daughter. He even allowed Moses' defeat at his first efforts to save his people and sent him into the wilderness for necessary years of reflection. God may have been silent before he spoke to Moses from the burning bush, but we've seen his hand at work all along, bringing Moses to meet him there and preparing his heart to listen.

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⁷ George A.F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 12.