
Moses, Leadership, and Transition

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 17 – Year A

Exodus 3:15 — God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.

*Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this 13th Sunday in Pentecost. I hope this finds you healthy, well, and staying safe. In the reading from Exodus this morning we find a people in transition and a leader, in Moses, also in transition or, perhaps in a process of transformation.

~ Walter Brueggemann, my erstwhile colleague from Columbia Seminary, teaches about three kinds of Psalms and, as such, three kinds of journeys: Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation. And, we know this pattern well as Christians and Episcopalians in the form of our journey during Holy Week from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter...

~ This familiar pattern is one about which Richard Rohr and other authors have written as part of our spiritual journey. It is also about our "salvation," because we are indeed "saved" by knowing and surrendering to this universal journey of reality. Knowing the full pattern allows us to let go of the first order, accept the disorder, and, sometimes hardest of all—to grieve our losses and trust the new reorder.

~ In some ways during this season of pandemic, we are living out our own version of that Exodus journey.

~ Ignatius, one of our spiritual forefathers and mothers, wisely said that we must learn to practice what he called "Holy Indifference" when we encounter those limit places where we must let go of our illusion that we can order and control the world through whatever means we seek to do so. Release of control to God will show itself as compassion and generosity, and less attention to rules and regulations. This will normally be experienced, Rohr says, as a move toward humility and real community. It may also mean that we can discover **leadership abilities** in ourselves, and new ways of being in community, perhaps in ways that are surprising.

~ "Leadership" is a broad topic and we may be tempted to think it does not apply to us. I want to challenge that notion, and invite us to think together about leadership, and about how we might lead ourselves and others on this Exodus journey during and out of this season of our lives. The origin of the word "leader" means, simply, to guide. So let's think together about how we might guide one another in this season of disorientation.

~ You may see yourself as a leader, you may not.... But Quaker Educator Parker Palmer says that "*Leadership is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone's vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads.*" No matter who or where we are, we may be called to lead in this threshold season, and to practice resurrection in ways that may surprise us. Leadership is not an identity; rather, it is a role; leading is not who we are; leading is what we do – *at least some of the time.*

And I don't believe that leaders are born any more than great violinists or runners or surgeons or football players are born. I believe that leadership can be learned – primarily through practice and experience—and

that it can take an infinite variety of forms. Indeed, it may be that when we bump up against our own limitations, and those things in relation to which we are afraid, we can discover in ourselves the capacity to lead in ways that may surprise us. And we have, in our Exodus text from this morning, an excellent example. So I want to invite us to think through some of the key elements of leadership; to do so, I'm going to invoke someone we all know: Moses, whose story we know well...

- Moses was both flawed **and** called:
 - Moses reminds us we do not have to be heroic or have special charisma;
 - did not seek the job – there was no ad on Linked in saying “prophet needed to lead exodus – forever reshape relationship with YHWH”;
 - Moses was attuned to the problem (they were slaves) and attuned to the sacred (he saw a burning bush);
 - he was present and awake;
 - he responded to the need and the opportunity;
 - he did the job that had to be done, despite being flawed and called...
- Articulated a vision :
 - Clear about current reality – slavery in a foreign land
 - Clear about future promise – promised land and new relationship to YHWH
 - Creative tension—Imagination and resilience emerge out of liminal, transitional times and spaces...

*Mobilized the people, and persevered to realize/achieve that vision:

- Identify allies, empower others, delegate responsibility – Miriam & Aaron; 70 elders
- Moses’ leadership and ours has a pastoral quality
- Leading helps others claim their own leadership
- Lead by calling forth and supporting the leadership of others
- Jesus always helps grow people up; does not infantilize
- Acted; took next steps even with limited info – pillar of cloud and pillar of fire
 - Experiment; trial & error; take risks
 - *“In order to discover new lands, one must be willing to lose sight of the shore for a very long time”* Andre Gide (French author of 20th)
- Moses didn’t wait for a map; he didn’t know the route. Sometimes all we know is the next step (MLK, Jr.)
- “Your word is a lantern to my feet, and a light upon my path.” Psalm 119:105 – even when we wish we had the end in sight
- Willing to go through immediate discomfort for a greater good; the “acting” of leadership is hard, sometimes messy, **harrowing**.
- Moses heard the lamentations of the people, and pushed on.
- Be aware of our need to be liked and our need to make everyone happy; these will cripple us every time. “No need to become a quivering mass of availability.”

Acting – especially with limited information and especially in the face of resistance – is hard. More than anything else, I believe this requires practice – try it, fail, succeed, get hurt, get back up. Expect that attempts at sabotage will occur...

- Moses was able to see the big picture...the Exodus was a means of coming to a new relationship with YHWH and relationship with one another;
 - The exodus called into question existing patterns of relationship; introduced new ones; e.g., Ten Commandments;
 - It is an Abrahamic journey, rather than an Odyssean journey, ending up back in Ithaca, and the home Odysseus knew.

Leadership is messy work, spiritual work & creative and imaginatively prayerful work:

- Moses often feels inadequate to the task
- Moses often renegotiates with God and with the people
- Moses often adjusts course mid-stream
- Moses driven by a deep inner hunger & passion
- Moses not really in control; guided the people through a season marked by chaos as a new future

emerged on the horizon

- We too are called in small ways and large to guide others, even in small ways, as a new future emerges on the horizon; that could be the redesigning of our ways of doing business, or church, or school, or discerning the future of healthcare and justice systems, even in small ways; in this, like Moses, we are not really ultimately in control
- We too are a people shaped by Exodus
- We are seeking the promised land of right relationship and trusting the dignity of every human being... with God, we have a vision, and in faithful leadership we are willing to depart from what we know and willing to endure hardship; to do this, we put our trust in God

In the Gospel for today, dear one's Peter goes from being the Rock of faith to the rock that causes others to stumble. Still, Peter, like Moses, became a better leader for his challenges.

Being a leader in this or any season asks of us that we be willing to...

- Go deep within; it is a spiritual journey; face our own shadows and light
- Leading can be hard and it can be lonely; we need to take care of ourselves:
 - Sources of personal rejuvenation & renewal
 - Prayer, family, fun, exercise, rest
 - Sources of professional support & encouragement
 - Colleague group, therapist, coach, spiritual director
 - Know your growing edges
 - What would you do if you were not afraid?

It asks of us that we let go of control enough to trust God and improvise. As our Psalm appointed for today reminds us...

Search for the Lord and his strength; *
continually seek his face.

Remember the marvels he has done, *

- There's no map; if there were, you wouldn't need to be leading
- So, be sure to have fun, be playful; be generous and kind to yourself;
- Let yourself be led by the Spirit; be creative and imaginative
- Temptation is to resort to authority and competency (expert based) but what is needed is **authenticity...**

Most of us are not working on Moses' scale, nonetheless....

- The truth is that many of us will be called to lead the church into new territory; in a season of uncertainty and change. We are all priests of the church by virtue of our Baptism. We are all called to lead. And we never know how our efforts to lead, no matter how small, may touch the lives of others.
- Near the end of Deuteronomy, Moses is telling Joshua: Be strong. Be courageous. Do not be afraid. God is with you. He will not leave you. He will not forsake you. Do not be afraid!
- And there's this urgency in those words. Because Moses knows his time is ending and his life has been filled with folks that are both free and sometimes just didn't get it...and sometimes, faithless. His life has been filled with God choosing him for heaven-sized promises to steward with human-sized hands.
- Moses has fallen short and watched the people fall short. And through it all, through the promise God spoke to His people, Moses sees God as a pillar of cloud and a beacon of fire (Please! Read Exodus 13!) He sees God come before him, chatting with him face to face, as friends. He sees God split the Red Sea and make manna in the wilderness and move His people through the trenches, freed them from captivity.

Mostly, Moses sees God move to be in relationship with God's people. He sees God choose people in ways finally about abundance. And so here is this heart-grabbing wisdom that Moses offers with open hands: Do not be afraid because we know that the God who guides us is the One who goes before us — as a pillar of smoke and a beacon of fire.

Perhaps, in this liminal season, even our smallest gestures of compassion and grace, reaching out, choosing to be in relationship, are all forms of leadership each of us can practice. This is leadership that requires only our willingness to take the first step...to reach out in faith.

Among my favorite passages from the Hebrew Bible is Joshua 3:1-5. The NRSV version reads like this:

Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. ² At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³ and commanded the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, ⁴ so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. Then Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."

- **"For you have not passed this way before..."** We are indeed in new terrain, crossing a metaphorical Jordan River in this season of Covid-19 and the concomitant Social Distancing. Just as Joshua learned from Moses, and was able to act with leadership as the people of Israel prepared to cross the Jordan River, we, too, can practice life giving and graceful leadership, in ways small and large, if only we are willing to try, and not let our fear overwhelm us.
- The wonderful poet Seamus Heaney's last words in this earthly life were written, not spoken. From his hospital bed he texted to his wife, Marie, two words: **Noli timere**. Don't be afraid. These were words of courage for his beloved at a moment when God was about to do a profoundly new thing that she did not yet fully perceive.
- **Noli timere**. Fear not. Words of courage for us and for all of God's beloved, uttered throughout Holy Scripture by prophets, poets, angels, and Jesus, himself, whenever God is about to do a new thing. We are to be unafraid, even in the face of that new thing we do not yet quite perceive; that new thing that will inevitably draw us from the security of the familiar, that new thing that will undoubtedly change us.
- Our leadership depends, to some degree, on what we choose to pay attention to as a kind of spiritual discipline. We have to be willing to come up empty at first. Attention is the beginning of prayer, and if we stumble, that's fine. Moses stumbled too. It's our willingness to try that draws God to us, and us to God. Be not afraid.

The Epistle: Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

I don't know about you, but those are core values of leadership with which I can live, and upon which I can act, unafraid to lead.

Amen.