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1-30-22
Exodus 6:1-13
Living Stories: Assurance

Last week we met Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives whose act of creative disobedience allowed for the infant Moses to survive. This week we pick up Moses' story as he begins his work for the Lord, challenging Pharaoh with respect to the enslavement of the Hebrew people. Hear now these words from Exodus chapter 6, as the Lord assures Moses of the deliverance of the Israelites from oppression.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land."

God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The Lord' I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.'"

Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his land." But Moses spoke to the Lord, "The Israelites have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, poor speaker that I am?" Thus the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them orders regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, charging them to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There are some exchanges in scripture that you make you want to laugh - or at least smile with the recognition of yes... I too have been there. The dialogue between the Lord and Moses that we just heard is one of those passages for me. It reminds me so much of my adolescent self - my parents telling me to clean my room and me coming up with excuses as to why it was just not possible. Here we have the Lord telling Moses to clean not just his room but the whole neighborhood - the Lord tells Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites - to let them leave Egypt and the slavery that has bound them. And Moses - I can

see him in mind's eye - looks incredulous - you have got to be kidding me Lord. I just tried to tell the Israelites - your people - my people - this same thing and they would not listen to me. And if they won't listen to me - what makes you think Pharaoh - Pharaoh - is going to listen to me? Seriously. And in my mind's eye, I see the Lord with crinkling eyes with maybe a soft smile, but nonetheless firm in voice, giving Moses and brother Aaron orders to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt. The message is clear. Moses has a job to do and the Lord expects him to do it. No more complaining about how unqualified he is, no more wallowing in self-pity about his limitations, no more cries of unfairness. The time has come.

Next week we will hear pieces of the story of how Moses, with new-found trust in the Lord, convinces Pharaoh to let the people go. This week I want to focus on what happens in our lives before we get to the climactic moment of the story when we put it all on the line. How do we build our faith and trust in God? I'm going to give you the take home message now – Moses needed to – and each one of us needs to - recognize, claim and believe that he – that we - are a beloved child of God. We need to internalize our identity as a child of God and the assurance of God's love and grace, care and protection regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

I think it is instructive to look at what has transpired in Moses' life since we left him in the care of Pharaoh's daughter. Scripture doesn't tell us much (or anything really) about Moses' identity as the grandson of Pharaoh, although Walt Disney's animated *The Prince of Egypt* gives us a nice backstory with Moses and his adoptive brother Rameses, heir to the throne of Egypt, accidentally destroying a temple during a chariot race. They take some other creative licenses with Moses' formative years as well.

Scripture simply tells us that one day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where **his own** people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, Moses killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. Now there is a lot packed into those two verses¹. The fact that Moses killed an Egyptian is often highlighted in this passage for it sets up the next part of Moses' story, but for me the most important part of the passage is just slipped in there in the first sentence – Moses went out to where **his own** people were. His own people. Moses claims his identity as an Israelite. And he responds to this recognition. Now when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people, he didn't respond in the healthiest of ways. Nonetheless, Moses' response indicates he understands himself as one claimed by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Soon thereafter Moses realizes that the murder he committed will be uncovered and fears what will happen. His fear is well-founded because Pharaoh hears about it and tries to kill him. Moses flees to Midian – a place in the desert frequented by nomadic tribes. In Midian he rescues the daughters of the priest from a band of shepherds up to no good. In gratitude, the

¹ Exodus 2:11-13

Midian priest invites Moses to stay with them, and gives Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. Moses and Zipporah have a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, “I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.”² While Moses took an actual journey into the wilderness to escape from the challenges he faced at home, we can also understand that Moses was in a spiritual wilderness, grappling with his identity as a child of God. He had sinned and was paying the consequences for it as an exile in a foreign land. He was no longer an Egyptian, and was struggling to understand what it meant to be an Israelite.

Scripture tells us that Moses lived in the wilderness for a long period of time. Eventually the king of Egypt who had it out for him died. However the oppression and the enslavement faced by the Israelites worsened and they cried out to God. God heard them and called Moses back to action.

Now God’s call to Moses is truly one of the most memorable accounts in the Bible. Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush – a bush that while on fire did not burn up. The Lord says to Moses, “I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Moses responds – sure no problem. I’ll pack my bags right now and head back to Egypt. No – not really...Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you.”

And Moses still doesn’t pack his bags. Instead he asks who shall I say sent me and the Lord tells him, “I am who I am” or the proper name of the Lord – Yahweh.³ Moses, likely thinking back to his last encounter with Pharaoh and with the Hebrew people continues to give a litany of reasons why he can’t or shouldn’t be the one who leads the people out of slavery. And in a moment of incredible compassion for the plight of the very human Moses, God gives Moses a series of signs – of miracles – that Moses himself can perform to prove that he is the messenger of the Lord God⁴. Moses has the assurance that God will be him.

So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. The Lord sent Moses’ brother Aaron to meet him along the way and they return to Egypt together. It is all rainbows and unicorns, because they have the assurance that God is with them and the assurance that the Israelites who are enslaved will be freed. Except that it isn’t. Periodically those doubts creep back into Moses’ thinking... I am not good enough. I don’t deserve this. I

² Exodus 2:15-22

³ Exodus 3:1-14

⁴ Exodus 4:1-9

haven't earned this. My faith isn't strong enough. We see that story laid out in scripture time and time again. And this is a story that we too often live – a story that becomes part of our own narrative. A story that somehow God's love and mercy, God's grace and forgiveness are not free gifts for us. That we need to achieve them. We doubt that we are good enough or important enough or just "enough" for God to be present with us.

I understand Moses hesitancy to claim the mantle God was extending. I've been there more than a few times in my life – questioning my place, questioning God's presence in my life, questioning... and then God shows up reminding me, assuring me.

"Why are you making this so hard? It really is that simple. You are my child." the voice reassured me as the rain baptized my head. I was stunned and confused and calm and secure all at the same time. My junior year in college my prayer life dried up. Something that had been so natural became artificial. It was as if I could not remember how to breathe. It took me a good six months before I had the courage to talk to the college chaplain about this. I was embarrassed. I was an Elder in the College Church, preparing to go the PC(USA) General Assembly as a Youth Advisory Delegate. How could I not be able to pray? What was keeping me separated from God?

The conversation with my college chaplain helped, but I continued to struggle. And then one night when I least expected it, the wall came tumbling down. I was walking across the campus during an early spring evening. It wasn't supposed to rain, so I had no umbrella. I was lost in thought about the sorority meeting I had just come from and running late for dinner with a friend. God was nowhere in my neural processing. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were hanging out somewhere else that night. Or so I thought. But as gentle as the first misty drops, and as insistent as the steady rain that followed, God reminded me of the personal claim on me. Not because of anything I have done, or the potential for what I will do, but because God's nest is so deep, and warm and safe and full of companions on a similar journey.

It was a burning bush moment. A reminder of the personal claim God makes in each one of our lives, just as he reminded Moses. An assurance of God's mercy. An assurance that God will be present in the moments we are called to stand up to the Pharaohs in our lives, when God calls us to do the hard things; that God will be present when the unexpected happens; when the phone call comes in the middle of night; when the doctor says the treatment is not working; when your employer or spouse or friend says it would be better if we part ways. Those are the times we need to dig deep and know in our bones the living story of the assurance of God's presence. We call that faith. One of my favorite quotes about faith comes not from a famous religious figure, but from nuclear physicist Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb. He says, "When you get to the end of all the light you know and it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly." Join me in prayer.