

With Moses in the Tension of Opposites

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

March 20, 2022 ~ Exodus 3:1-15

Death never fails to surprise and shock us. This, in itself, is surprising – for death is as predictable and certain as anything in life. Yet through decades of pastoral ministry, I’ve known only a few to say, “yes, I was ready when she died,” and even then, it is followed promptly by “I didn’t know it would hit me this way.” It is as if there is some elemental truth in the nature of things that is ever in motion but is simply too big for us to attend to in any sustained way. At the time of death, in proximity to death, we are shocked. And then, by some seemingly generous biological switch born of our need to survive, we move on. Scarred perhaps, but we carry on; we potter about with the comings and goings of the day’s needs and next week’s horizon.

In something of the same manner, it seems, the war in Ukraine pulls back the veil and reveals some elemental truth about humankind, something ever in motion even when we don’t see: Our capacity as human beings to commit acts of unspeakable violence against one another. Right next to our capacity for heroic dignity and honor. Senseless cruelty and heartfelt compassion. An insatiable appetite for domination – and selfless sacrifice of open hearts, open homes, open arms.

We all know the truth of what it means to be human. We may not like to admit it, but in varying ways, we each harbor these polar extremes. This war, or any war, as with other conflicts, crises, and tragedies has the effect of pulling back the veil, revealing the shadow, the murk, the muck... within.

Checking in with people in the last week or two, parishioners, friends, family describe feeling fragile, on edge, near tears, precarious. Wanting to look away. Not wanting to look away. Wanting both to be numb – and to be awake. Feeling overwhelmed and at the same time mindful we’re not even in the war zone, nowhere near. Feeling both grateful and somewhat sheepish about living, for the most part, with extraordinary privilege. Regardless, it feels that the veil’s been pulled back, the lights turned all the way up, with no reprieve in sight. Our fragile hearts are stretched to breaking.

“I have heard the cry of my people.” This is what God said to Moses. Some of the most reassuring words in all of Holy Scripture. Spoken by God to a person and a people with their backs against the wall, struggling to survive. “I have seen their misery. I have heard the cry of my people.” Moses was, I believe, surprised by love, God’s unexpected love.

Like every person God selects for holy responsibility, Moses is a complicated character. Who is Moses? So many things. Prophet. Giver of the Law, the Ten Commandments. Enslaved laborer. Murderer. Leader of the people. Moses is a rebel, an upstart. Probably had a speech impediment. Moses is faithful. Moses knew well the murk and the muck, both within and about him. And, Moses is chosen by God, an agent of God’s will, God’s deliverance. Moses is synonymous with liberation, thus synonymous with hope.

God hears, sees, affirms, and calls forth that which is holy within us, individually and collectively. Not ignoring or discarding the cruel and nasty bits. God chooses and affirms the entirety. It is complicated Moses – with all the dark, the light, the shades in between – whom God calls to be faithful.

For a number of years I served on the faculty of something called CREDO, a clergy wellness program. My responsibility was to teach recently ordained clergy about leadership. So I

taught them about Moses. Moses is the epitome of an adaptive leader, to use the parlance of Ron Heifetz from Harvard Business School. Sometimes the challenge we face requires a “technical fix.” This is something with a clearly identifiable solution. The sink is leaking; you call the plumber; the plumber fixes the leak.

In contrast, an adaptive challenge is what we face when the solution is not yet known, the destiny not altogether clear, and the path... well, it has not yet been charted. An adaptive challenge involves a shift in the dynamics and patterns of relationship, that involves many players, and for which there may be no immediate or evident solution. Those of us leading little organizations or great big nations, and even families through the past few years of the pandemic have been forced to develop our capacity as adaptive leaders. Neither the path nor the destination are evident and we need to be together differently along the way.

On the day that Moses turned aside from what he was doing and noticed a bush that was burning, yet not consumed, he and his wife Zipporah were laboring – as were all the Hebrew people – as slaves in Egypt. Having murdered an Egyptian guard not long before, Moses was trying to keep a low profile. But an angel appeared, Moses turned to the bush, and God spoke to him. “I have heard the cry of my people.” Then God did this thing that God often does: God called Moses to himself, then sent him off with a BIG task. “Come. I will send you. I AM WHO I AM will send you. Come. Now go.” Accepting God’s call, Moses, of course, led the Exodus of the Hebrew people to the Promised Land.

Might we see in their journey a metaphor for our own? During those forty years in the wilderness, Moses had no map, no known path. Some problems were met with solutions: when the people cried out in hunger, Moses told God, and God provided Manna. Such clarity was the exception. For want of a map, God provided a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. The people were both wayward – forging a Golden Calf of idolatry. And faithful – receiving the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The people exhibited their worst and best selves: cruelty and compassion, envy and self-sacrifice, petty greed and abundant generosity.

Most important, by the time they got to the Promised Land, the people had learned – in their hearts, their soul, their guts – the people knew that they were people and children of God. A hard lesson, worth whatever it costs. In the trials and challenges of the wilderness – through the heat of the day and the cold of the night – the veil of security was pulled back entirely. With no place to hide, they learned what it is to be human, which is, to be loved by God. Not protected from the murk and muck, but loved enough to live through it, and to love one another along the way.

In 1954, the Cold War tension between Russia and the United States was high. A student of Carl Jung asked what he thought of the likelihood of nuclear war. Jung responded, “I think it depends on how many people can stand the tension of the opposites in themselves. If enough can do so, I think the situation will *just* hold, and we shall be able to creep around innumerable threats and thus avoid the worst catastrophe of all; the final clash of opposites in an atomic war.”

We’re not called to serve and lead on the scale that Moses did. We’re not called to negotiate a peace between the nations, most of us. Yet each of us is called to face and withstand the tension of the opposites within ourselves, and to heed the promise of God – to watch and listen for the signs, to maintain hope against all odds, to choose paths and make decisions with insufficient information, and to gather our household, however large or small it may be, and lead those who will come with us, toward the promised land.

How might the unveiled truth of these difficult days be for us an invitation to deeper holiness and love? In diagnosing the world's ills, Mother Teresa of Calcutta said simply, "we have forgotten that we belong to one another." Let us now remember; let us remember: we belong to one another. Amen.