

## **LESSONS FROM MOSES' SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: YOU CAN'T MAKE EVERYBODY HAPPY ALL THE TIME**

Exodus 16:2-8 and Exodus 17:2-7

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During this month that we are focusing on spiritual journeys, as we read stories of some of the spiritual journeys described in the Bible, as we see the stories of some of our own members highlighted in video, I hope that you feel encouraged to reflect on your own spiritual journey, to ask yourself, "When have you felt the presence of God in your life in a very real way?" "What experiences have been most spiritually rich and alive for you?" And..."When have you felt that God was absent?" Opening ourselves to questions like these helps us learn more about ourselves. Please realize that no one's life consists of steady progress. We all encounter challenges and setbacks, and in fact, as one of the sermons in this series will remind us, it is often those times of difficulty that lead to the most growth.

I am fascinated by the way people navigate and negotiate the millions of daily decisions that make up our daily lives. It's why I enjoy reading biographies and why I love, most of all, movies about the lives of real people. I feel inspired when I read about people who overcome obstacles, I become more empathetic when I see that most people are truly trying their best in a world that is often incredibly difficult. The stories of others makes me feel more connected to all of humanity. We pay a lot of attention to our differences, especially - these days - our political differences, but when we really listen to one another's stories, we realize what we have in common.

No spiritual journey is ever completely straightforward. If you read the biographies of people who have been called saints, you'll read about journeys full of twists and turns. No one who has achieved a deep and rewarding relationship with God would describe their life as one mountaintop experience after another. Most everyone spends some time in the valley, in a dry period, in a shadow of doubt.

Sometimes we just wander and feel lost for a while.

I spent a week in Arizona at the beginning of January. The retreat center where I was staying was on the edge of the Saguaro National Park. One day I was looking for a hiking trail in the national park. I knew that it began down a certain path, and I felt certain that I'd found the beginning of the trail when I saw these rocks... This looks pretty clear, doesn't it? There is no way that these rocks just randomly happened to land in this particular spot - someone placed them here. I was excited to follow them but not more than a three-minute walk later I was here. Not only a dead end, but a dead end with a barbed wire fence! A dead end in bold capital letters!

I retraced my steps, back to the rocks, this time wondering what kind of sick joke they were meant to be...who would direct people to a barbed wire fence?

I kept walking and walking, and thought I'd somehow missed the trail. I came across a rusted abandoned car and wondered if it was some kind of symbol of my spiritual journey. Luckily, I didn't have to dwell on that possibility too long. Finally, here, the trail, unmistakable this time:

That's the way our journeys go sometimes. We feel certain, then we're crushed; we feel people are deliberately misleading us. We wonder at signs we see along the

way. But, in trust and in faith, we keep walking. And sometimes we are rewarded with views like this:

How can you have a sermon series on spiritual journeys without talking about the most famous journey in the Bible, the 40-year journey of Moses and the people of Israel, from slavery in Egypt to the promised land?

Here's the backstory. The Israelite people, the Hebrew people were living in Egypt when a new king came to power. He noticed how many Israelites there were, and how powerful they were, and he was afraid of them...He didn't have any rational or logical reason to be afraid, but he was. "What if there's a war," he said, "and they join the other side and fight against us?" Acting out of fear, he began a campaign of oppression against the Israelites. He forced them into hard labor, and then he began ordering that all boy babies be killed...at this point in the story comes Moses, the baby saved, first by his birth mother who puts him in a basket in the river, then by the Pharaoh's daughter who rescues him from the river. He grows up in the Pharaoh's household but eventually finds out he is really a part of the Hebrew people.

Fast forward to Moses as an adult. While he's tending his flocks one day, God appears to him in the form of a burning bush and god says to him, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I know their sufferings, I've seen how the Egyptians oppress them. I am sending you to lead them out of Egypt." And several plagues and miracles later, they are on their way. The book of Exodus tells us that they sing a hymn of praise to the God who has freed them, and they set out for the Promised Land.

But there's no map and there's no itinerary, no schedule assuring them of when they would arrive. Most significantly, there's no food and there's no water. And they are real human beings in the desert, with livestock, animals and children. Of course they complain! They're frightened! And unlike the Pharaoh, who was just in fear of losing his power, they have legitimate reason to be afraid. They're afraid they'll die.

So they start complaining. And if you just read the words, you may think, "What a bunch of whiners." "We wish we were back in Egypt. Why'd you bring us out here, Moses? At least when we were slaves in Egypt we had food to eat and water to drink." But think about being in the desert with no water. Think about having no food to feed your children.

Moses hears the complaints and Moses takes them to God. "God, you're the one who wanted me to do this job. You're the one who leapt out at me from a burning bush and who gave me no choice but to follow you. You led us out of Egypt, out from under the punishing realm of Pharaoh, you parted the Red Sea for us. Now you need to give these people something to eat and something to drink." And God does. A miraculous bread called manna appears every morning, and at night, quails to eat for meat. God instructs Moses to hit a rock, and from it, water appears so the people have something to drink.

The people's complaints are matched by the provisions and faithfulness of God. For a while, at least, the people of Israel remember to trust. They trust in Moses as their leader, and they rely on God to keep them safe on their journey.

How can we hear this story and not think of people today who are journeying with their children trying to find a land where they will be safe and free? Current stats are

these: 71 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes, the most since World War II, and half of them are children. 26 million have been forced to leave their countries, most of them from Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

How can we hear the murmurings of the people of Israel and not think about our own complaints and mutterings? I have heard myself sigh, as I stare into the refrigerator, "There's no food in this house." I have caught myself saying, "It's awful to try to come up with new recipes for dinner." Or, "I know drinking water is good for me, but it's SO boring." This picture was from an article this fall documenting the fact that 2 million Americans do not have access to running water or basic plumbing. Imagine trying to keep your children healthy and clean, getting them to school in the morning, without what we consider these basic necessities of life.

Our spiritual journeys are never ours alone - we are connected to one another, whether we know their names or not. If we are journeying towards God, and with God, then we are journeying toward greater compassion, empathy and trust that God wants all of God's people to thrive.

It must have been incredibly frustrating for Moses to try to lead under these circumstances. After all, he's hungry, too. He's thirsty, too. He's not journeying through the desert on a camel-pulled chariot complete with a Yeti cooler. No, he's walking right beside the people he's been called to lead. He knows thirst and hunger yet still the people's words must sting. "We'd rather be back in Egypt", they say, choosing the words that would hurt him the most.

Leaders want to keep their followers happy, and I'm sure Moses was no exception. I'm sure he didn't welcome conflict any more than most of us do. Yet he

persisted in taking the journey he was called to take, keeping his eyes on the prize - the land that had been promised to the people. The best leaders know that it's impossible to keep everyone happy all of the time. Parents know that if they are doing their job right, their children will not always like their decisions and their rules.

I'm reading a historical novel about the Civil War right now; it describes Lincoln's agony as he tried to find positions that would keep the country together, or keep it from splintering further. How much freedom to give the slaves when? He continually would make a step in one direction, then a step in the other, trying desperately to maintain a delicate balance between exercising his moral authority and holding together a nation united by only the thinnest of threads.

We know this truth in our life together as a church. We don't always agree, on politics, on priorities, on our organizational structure, on music, on worship style, on how much to change and how much tradition to maintain. We each have to be faithful to the way God is speaking to each of us on the journey we've been called to walk. Yet our paths converge and we care about not only being right but the feelings of those who walk with us. May God help each of us keep our eyes on our mission: Growing People to Serve God and Others.