

Kids Stump the Preacher: Mo and the Big Exit

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Exodus 3:1-12

There was once a story told about a young preacher, fresh out of seminary who stood up one Sunday morning in his first-ever church and started reading the scripture. The passage that he had chosen for the day was from the book of Exodus, chapter 14 – the story of Moses parting the Red Sea and the Israelites walking across on dry land.

But when he started reading, something that he did not expect happened. A little old lady who usually sat quietly on the back pew suddenly jumped up from her seat and started hollering and shouting, making a horrible raucous. “Hallelujah!” she shouted. “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

All eyes turned to stare at the woman, but she wasn’t phased. She just kept calling out, singing out, lifting her arms up toward the heavens and wildly shouting out words of praise.

Well, this poor young preacher hadn’t the foggiest idea what in the world he should do. First, he thought, he should ignore the disturbance and just keep on reading. But his microphone was no match for the loud shouts of the woman and he’d basically lost the congregation by this point. So he paused, and turned to the woman and asked her, what’s going on? What’s got you so excited? Whatever it is, we want to be able to celebrate with you!

And the woman grinned a big grin and boisterously shouted out “I serve a God who is so powerful that he can part the mighty waters of the Red Sea and the whole Israelite people can walk across on dry land! How cool is that?!?!”

“Well,” thought the young preacher, “this is what I was made for. I learned a little bit about this in seminary. It’s time for me to teach her a thing or two.”

And so he said, “well, you know, some scholars think that this miracle might not have been exactly like what we imagine. You see, there were two different bodies of water, both in the same region. One of them was the Red Sea, and the other was the much smaller “Sea of Reeds” – which was less of a massive body of water, and more like a swamp. And due to issues with translation we don’t really know for sure which “sea” the Bible is actually talking about. And at some times of the year, when the wind is just right, it causes a natural “parting” effect in the Sea of Reeds so that the Israelites would have been able to get across safely, no problem. It would have been like walking through ankle-deep muck.

So yes, God is big, and God is powerful. But let's not get too excited about this "miracle" just yet. Because it might not have been as mighty or powerful as you might think.

Well, the woman's smile faded, and she visibly deflated. She went silent. And she quietly returned to her seat, obviously upset. And the preacher went back to his scripture reading.

But a few verses in, the woman was up again, yelling and shouting and hollering, and raising her hands and this time dancing up and down the aisle of the church. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!"

And the young preacher stopped again, and turned to the woman and asked her, "now what is it? What's so exciting this time?"

"Because I serve a God who can drown an entire Egyptian army in ankle-deep muck!"

So today we are continuing our series of sermons titled "Kids Stump the Preacher," where the kiddos of the church have picked all of our scripture readings for the next month and a half. We started last week with the story of Noah's Ark, and we are continuing this week with the story of Moses.

And it is a little bit difficult for me to even know how to begin, because the story of Moses is so huge. And every bit of it is wildly dramatic. I mean, we could read the first fourteen chapters of the book of Exodus straight through and we'd only just barely get to the other side of the Red Sea. And then the *real* work begins – the work of Israel trying to discover who they are apart from life in slavery. Rediscovering what it meant to be called God's people – figuring out how to rely on God and trust God and obey God's commandments.

So in a nutshell, here's the story. By the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his 12 sons have all moved from the land of Canaan to Egypt – first, in search of food during a famine, and then, because Joseph (Jacob's son) had found himself in a position of great power and respect, and he was able to set his family up very well there in Egypt.

But time passed. Generations. Joseph got old and died, and he faded from Egypt's memory. Jacob's descendants – the people of Israel – were fruitful. And they multiplied. And they became a significant population in the land of Egypt. And then one day a new Pharaoh ascended to the throne who started to get nervous about these Israelites. He worried that as a people group they were growing so fast, that they would soon outnumber the Egyptians. And then, they could rise up and overthrow him, if they wanted to. So in order to keep the Israelites in check, Pharaoh decided to enslave them. Force them to literally build his empire.

But the Israelite people continued to grow and to multiply – even in slavery. So Pharaoh concocted a new plan: Don't let them reproduce. Instruct all of the midwives to kill every baby boy at birth, so that they won't grow up into powerful young warriors.

But this didn't exactly work, either – especially since the midwives were on the side of the Israelites. And so Pharaoh upped the ante again: Fine. If the midwives aren't going to kill the babies, then all the young boys should be thrown into the Nile River.

And that's where Moses enters the picture. A young Israelite boy born and hidden, until he gets too big to hide anymore – at which point his mother places him in a basket and floats him down the river, hoping and praying for the best. Moses is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, and adopted. And raised in the Egyptian palace as the adopted grandson of Pharaoh.

Which all goes great, until one day Moses sees an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew slave, and Moses gets angry and kills the guard. He flees, in terror, into the countryside, where he is taken in by a priest named Jethro and his family, and he spends several years living the life of a shepherd.

Until one day, when Moses is out in the foothills with his sheep, and he notices a bush that was burning, and yet was not *burning up*. When he got closer, he discovered that it wasn't a fire at all, but it was God, calling out to him, calling him to return back to Egypt – back to the place that he was actively running away from – to tell his adoptive family – to let the Israelite people go.

There are times in my life that I lament that God doesn't seem to speak in burning bushes so much anymore – and there are times that I like to say that I wish God were more clear with me sometimes about what God wants. But if this is the kind of call that comes out of the burning bush...I don't think that I would want that. To be told that I have to face my deepest fears, and risk death and imprisonment, to go tell one of my closest family members that God is mad at him and therefore he is going to lose his entire labor force or else be faced with pestilence and even death? Yeah. I think I would want to take a hard pass on that one.

But even though Moses protests, and makes a few excuses, he is obviously a far gutsier person than I am – because in the end, he says yes. He goes back to Egypt, marches up to Pharaoh, and tells him that if he does not let God's people go, God will bring about plagues and pestilence upon all of Egypt.

Which is exactly what happens. Water turning to blood and becoming undrinkable. Pretty dangerous – especially in the desert. Frogs, everywhere. Lice. Flies. Death of the livestock. Open sores. Hail. Locusts. Darkness. And then finally, when none of these work God gives Pharaoh a dose of his own medicine and puts to death all of Egypt's firstborn sons.

And it is finally at that point that Pharaoh concedes and lets Israel go. God leads them out of Egypt and through the wilderness, providing them guidance and protection, while at the same time Pharaoh has yet another change of heart and sends his armies in pursuit of the Israelites, intent on bringing them back again.

And then finally, with the Egyptians in rapid pursuit, Moses leads the people to the banks of the Red Sea, where it seems like all is going to be lost. They are trapped. With no place to go. Until Moses raises his staff, dips it into the water, and the waters part, giving the Israelites safe passage across. And as soon as the last Israelite has set foot on the other side and all of the Egyptian armies have begun to make their way across the sea, God causes the waters to rush down on the armies, drowning them all in the rushing waters.

And finally, Israel is free.

I have to laugh – that this is the second story that the kids have requested – that is *really not* a story for kids. With death and disease; murder and genocide and infanticide; evil rulers and broken people around every corner, this story absolutely does not give us the prettiest picture of humanity.

When the hero of the story is a murderer who runs away from his problems and makes all kinds of excuses for why he can't do the job God is calling him to do.

When the king – the one who exudes strength and is even worshipped by the Egyptians as a god – the one who is charged with the care and protection of all of those who live under his rule – is so afraid and so insecure that he would rather enslave and put to death his fellow human beings than learn to work with them. When he would rather see *his own people* suffer from disease and plague than concede and allow the Israelites an ounce of dignity.

When the one appointed by God to help Moses – his brother Aaron – is later the one to lead the charge to build a golden calf for Israel to worship – *instead* of God.

I mean, there are a couple of *real*, true heroes in this story. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah come to mind. Using their lowly position to do what little they could to effect change. That was gutsy. And it had an impact.

And Pharaoh's daughter. Knowing fully well that this baby that she found in the wicker basket was a Hebrew boy that her father had marked for execution – she adopted him instead and raised him as her own. That, also, took guts.

I think maybe one thing I love most about this story is that in the end it is the people who have the *least* power, the *least* influence, the *least* say-so in life that end up changing the course of history. A woman who adopts a baby who is known only by her relationship to the king. We never even get to know Pharaoh's daughter's name.

Hebrew slaves who are beaten down and battered, but they take the risk and follow a guy who they barely know, on the off chance that maybe what this guy says is true.

Midwives, who spend every day with the most vulnerable of all people, standing at the threshold of life and death and coming face-to-face every single day with life's most beautiful and life's most painful and life's most heartbreaking situations.

These are the people on whom this story hinges. At its core, it is not a story about powerful kings and burning bushes and the parting of the Red Sea. Those are *pieces* of the story, but the *real* story is all about real, messy, everyday people without much power or much influence or much standing or much notoriety, choosing to do hard and messy things when it is inconvenient and sometimes even dangerous to do so. Saying "yes" to God, and then stepping out in faith, hoping against hope that God knows what he is doing, and trusting that God will follow through on his promises.

It's a story about you. And about me. People who live in this little corner of Adams County, and who look at all of the big and overwhelming and life-shattering events of the world and wonder how in the world we can have an impact. When we witness – along with the Israelites – disease and pestilence and plague; when we see evil and cruelty and violence staring us in the face every time we turn on the TV. When those in positions of power use their power to gain more power, rather than using their position to serve those they are called to lead.

If the story of Moses teaches us nothing else, it is that there isn't a single one of us who is too messed up, too broken, too lowly, too insignificant to be used by God in powerful ways in the tiny little corner of the world that we inhabit. To make the best decisions that we can with the circumstances that are dropped into our laps – and to trust that in some tiny little small way, God will use our little "yes"s of today to build up to the miracles of tomorrow. That as we go about our work, our relationships, or tasks and projects of today, God may just use the people and things in our direct path to accomplish something big down the road.

So today, as we go about the hard work of life, may we say "yes" to the leading of God's Spirit – even if it seems messy and confusing and doesn't altogether make sense. Because we serve a God who works through the small and the nonsensical to bring about the miraculous. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!