

Introduction to the Scripture

Last week we heard from Chapter 14 of Exodus – and as you may recall, it ends with praise and rejoicing, singing and dancing. After the Israelites safely cross the Red Sea, with Pharaoh’s army drowned behind them and a pillar of fire ahead of them, everything seems great. Chapter 14, verse 31, concluded that “Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.”

As we will hear in a moment, that doesn’t last long. Moses’ leadership has many more tests to come. And as we jump to Exodus 32, we have a sort of split-screen moment. Moses is up on top of Mt Sinai – receiving not just the 10 Commandments, which is the part we remember, but very long and detailed instructions about all kinds of things -- how to build the ark of the covenant, what sort of vestments priests should wear, and a whole range of rules. In the end he’ll be up there for 40 days and 40 nights. Meanwhile, down in the valley below... well, let’s find out.

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Becoming an Armed Prophet

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Some of you may know that my father is a Methodist minister. He's retired now but during his long career one of his proudest accomplishments was winning a conference-wide award for preaching. So growing up, I spent a lot of time listening to sermons.

And as Mary noted, I am a professor, across the street and over the quad at Bowdoin College. So nowadays I spend a lot of time talking.

But the last time I talked from a pulpit in this particular capacity was in something like 5th grade. It was one of those services where the church school kids run the show on a slow summer Sunday in hopes of boosting attendance a little. No one, but no one, wanted to give the sermon, and I got pushed into it because, after all, my dad was the minister. It was about something in the gospel of Matthew, but that's about all I remember except that it was really pretty terrible as a sermon and possibly even worse as prose. The fact was, I didn't have a lot to say.

Now, fair warning, when Mary told me (you heard her say, “asked me,” but you be the judge!) – when she *approached* me about preaching this morning, all the evil ghosts of that 5th grade experience rose again. On the other hand, when she said we would be in the midst of a series on Moses and the Exodus, I thought this might be a place to slot in where I *do* have something to say. You’ll have to decide! But as Mary said, over the past number of years I have taught a first year seminar on political leadership, and one of the leaders we discuss at some length in that class is, you guessed it, Moses. I will spare you the Powerpoints. As a wise man said, power corrupts, but Powerpoint corrupts absolutely...

So... My students are not always ready to think about Moses as a figure for academic study in the first place, and certainly not as a *political* leader. Isn’t he a *religious* figure? Isn’t he in the *Bible*? That’s a question mark at the end of that sentence, if you didn’t catch it – a fair number of my students these days have never read an actual Bible. When it comes to Exodus I’ve got a better shot with my Jewish students, but even there it’s hardly guaranteed. So I need to make the case. Obviously, Moses is indeed a religious figure, which to some of my students means he is a mythical

figure, given that his biography and that of the Israelite exodus, as traced not just in the book of Exodus but also in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, is hard to read exactly literally as history and scholars tell us it is archeologically suspect. But let's take that narrative on its own terms and frame the question this way: how do you take a population of 600,000 adults (basically the city of Boston - plus children, plus livestock), and inspire them to break their bonds of captivity, and lead them over the course of forty years around and about various deserts to a new home? The first answer, well, is God. And I'll talk more today about God - more about God as God, anyway - than I do in my class.

I want to suggest, however, that the second answer... is government!

Indeed, let's just stipulate for a moment that the Exodus story is not pure history, but legend. If so... it's pretty interesting that a legend should be so concerned with the nuts and bolts of organizing and governing.

When we think of legends, after all, we think of instructive stories drawn from a past that have been organized precisely to lay out certain lessons as the most important things to take from that past. Also there are usually adventures and monsters and magic - and those *are* in fact in the Exodus!, but in between there are long pages, books' worth!, of rules and regulations

for every contingency – property rights, architecture, food safety, on and on -- rituals of immense complexity, bureaucratic frameworks of authority and enforcement, even a guide to the importance of the peaceful transfer of power. All of it is aimed at the end goal of living together in community. It is about the practical implementation of our covenant with each other in society. And it is *that* task the authors of the Exodus thought was most important for us to remember.

So it's the kind of legend a political scientist can really appreciate. And it's no accident that Moses appears as a recurring figure in a famous book by someone who knew something about the topic of political leadership -- Niccolo Machiavelli, in *The Prince*.

I'm going to circle back to Machiavelli. But let's think first about Moses, and some of the confounding challenges he faces. He has to reintroduce himself to Egypt – where, remember, he lived for 40 years but where he hasn't been resident for another 40 years. And he has to get himself some followers – you can't be a leader, without followers – and he has to convince them that *his* vision for their future is one *they* should buy into. He's got his older brother Aaron to do some smooth talking for him, and he certainly has some plague-providing divine assistance, but mostly,

he's got a plan. A promise, and a promised land – in short, a narrative. Even so let's not forget that the Israelites' first reaction to Moses, back in Exodus chapters 5 and 6, is to be pretty dubious – “they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit.” When Pharaoh complains that Moses is distracting the Israelites from their work and piles on additional tasks, who do the Israelites yell at? – Moses. “You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword to their hand to kill us.” And let's face it, as followers go, the Israelites are pretty frustrating. Time after time, they turn to Moses and complain. There's not enough water. There's not enough food. “If only we had died in Egypt!” the people complain. Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” I mean, if you're going to kill us, why make us walk so far first? They're hungry, their feet hurt, there's no wifi and no place to charge their phones anyway. They have many problems. And of course, when they get to Sinai, they decide that the answer to their problems is, God – so they make another one, a golden calf that they can worship, egged on by Aaron of all people.

Now, as we've just heard, God is pretty peeved at this point. He's given them water from stones, he's given them manna from heaven, and this is the thanks he gets?

But hold that thought for a moment. It's worth thinking about the plot twists that got us here, before seeing what comes next. First off, almost immediately after the miracles in the desert that keep the people alive in the short term, the whole party winds up near Moses' midlife stomping grounds in the neighborhood of Midian. Moses has dinner with his father in law Jethro and, for dessert, gets a lesson in leadership. Jethro points out that Moses cannot serve as judge and administrator for such a huge population - "you will surely wear yourself out," he says. What Moses needs is - a bureaucracy! Look for able men among all the people, Jethro says, those who are trustworthy and incorruptible - and make yourself an executive branch: "Set such men over the people as officers over thousands, hundred, fifties, and tens." And, in a line I'm glad *my* father in law is not present to hear, the Bible tells us that "Moses listened to his father in law and did all that he had said." Suddenly, where there was only Moses - and maybe sometimes Aaron - now there is an extensive hierarchy.

And as soon as that is in place, immediately afterwards in the text comes the long sequence at Mt Sinai, where God lays out a detailed code of behavior that goes well beyond the 10 commandments. God hands down laws concerning violence, property, restitution, and justice, lessons regarding festivals and sacrifice, detailed instructions regarding the construction and even the interior design of the tabernacle of the Lord and of priestly vestments.

So now, as of Chapter 32, we have not only a government but a practical code of law for that government to enforce.

Which brings us to where we left off a minute ago. The people are “reveling” -- drinking, dancing, doing other dubious things as filmed by Cecil DeMille, though he needed a G rating and the Bible suggests they are not doing G-rated things. In any case they have deserted God, and God is angry. “Let me alone,” God says to Moses, “so that my wrath may burn against them and I may consume them.” I’m done with the Israelites, God says – tell you what, Moses, I will make of YOU a great nation. Let’s start over.

But Moses will *not* let God alone. He won’t leave his community. He talks back, and he talks God down. Remember your ancient promises to

Abraham, to Isaac, Moses says. Turn from your wrath. And anyway, he adds, with a bit of a sly but apparently convincing twist, why would you want the Egyptians to laugh at you? you conquered them, but they will be able to say you did it with evil intent – just to wipe your own people off the earth. What kind of god does that? And in the end, as Exodus 32 verse 14 says, “the Lord changed his mind.”

In fact this is far from the only time in the Exodus sequence that Moses has to convince God not to kill the entire Israelite population. See for instance Numbers 13 and 14 – which is the first time they make it to the border of Canaan, only two years, not 40, into their journey. But I digress. In the story of the Golden Calf, as Moses rejects divine justice, he has a more pragmatic sort of instrumental justice in mind. As he makes his way down the mountain, he confronts a spluttering Aaron (“it’s not my fault!”) and then what is still a rather uncontrite population – in verse 25, Moses sees “that the people were running wild... to the derision of their enemies.” And then comes a short sequence that we often skip over. It comes as a bit of a shock to my students, and perhaps to you. Starting in verse 26:

Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said 'who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. He said to them... 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother; kill your friend; kill your neighbor.' The sons of Levi did as Moses had commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, 'today you have ordained yourself for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.'

Both of these scenes – the bargaining with God, and the cruel sacrifice he demands of his followers in God's name -- are crucial to Moses' leadership, I think. I mentioned Machiavelli. A line of his I've always liked seems apt – and indeed, he uses it to describe Moses. "Hence it is," Machiavelli writes in Chapter 6 of *The Prince*, "Hence it is, that all the armed prophets conquered and the unarmed ones were ruined." The armed prophets conquered – and the unarmed prophets were ruined. So that immediately begs a question: with what is Moses armed?

Well, as we've just seen, he is armed with the ability to negotiate – in fact to negotiate with God. He can manage up, as well as down. He can

listen, and delegate. And he knows that in most cases bargaining works better than command.

But as we also just saw, he is armed as well with a certain ruthlessness – and, as of the end of our reading, with a small elite army to enforce it. The sons of Levi have bound themselves together, and bound themselves to Moses, having killed their brother, their friend, their neighbor, to prove their faith and loyalty to their leader. In some ways a rather chilling scene. I ask my students what it reminds them of – and pretty often, they say “The Godfather.” And you know what? They’re not wrong.

So what makes Moses more than a mafia don here, makes him more than a gang leader? Well, I would suggest the answer is the third weapon in his armory. It is his unflagging commitment to the communal journey on which he and his followers are embarked. The German intellectual Max Weber said leaders have to have what he called “proportion” – which in his telling is effectively the ability to do things that hurt people, to shut out the impact of one’s actions on any given individual. To send soldiers into battle. Or, let’s just say, to order the death of people’s brothers, their friends, their neighbors.

But that by itself doesn't make you a leader – it might make you a psychopath. So Weber also said you have to have not just proportion but *passion* – specifically a passion for the common good, the greater end.

And that, finally, is what Moses is armed with. Remember what he tells the Levites: *you have ordained yourself for the service of the Lord*. He is armed with God's vision, personifying higher aims, and dedicated to making God's promise succeed on earth.

The Levites enforce his vision because it is grounded in a narrative so powerful that he can inspire a very skeptical, doubting, wandering -- very human -- population to follow him through the wilderness for more than a generation. It is a narrative so powerful that what seems impossible becomes inevitable. Indeed, it is a narrative so powerful that thousands of years later, slave owners in the American south would literally tear it out of the Bibles that they gave their slaves. It is a narrative so powerful that those slaves found it anyway – and sang it, and marched it, and shamed the rest of America to live up to its founding promises. It is a narrative so powerful that Moses – the man who at first tries to pretend he didn't hear the voice from the burning bush, who tells that voice to send someone else, someone younger and smarter and more articulate – comes to believe in it

to the point where he argues with God when it is *God* who suddenly has doubts, when it is *God* who doesn't think the chosen people are up to much. Moses is armed – but he's an armed *prophet* – and that he is a prophet matters too. Time after time, Moses argues for patience, for redemption, for forgiveness, for long-term commitment to the vision with which God graced him. He even accepts that after all his own sacrifice, he personally won't even get to that promised land – and that too, is an act of political leadership, because he knows that the endeavor has to be larger than a single individual. The person doesn't matter: the promise does. And so it is Joshua who leads the people into Canaan – and, not for nothing, in the 3rd chapter of the book of Joshua, he leads them across a body of water that God has parted, and the people once again walk on dry land.

Now, one thing I note in my course is that *all of us* have missions of political leadership – because we all live in community, and the very task of politics – which comes from the Greek word meaning “affairs of the cities,” the affairs of the communal -- is to bring us as citizens together to govern that community with the goal of preventing private hatred from becoming public policy.

On the other hand my course is not set up to conclude with specific normative lessons we might draw from Moses's example. It's certainly not about preaching the role of God in human agency. In fact sometimes my students write papers that question whether Moses was much of a leader at all. They point out, without God sending plagues and parting waters and floating manna down from heaven and all the rest, Moses's leadership – his leadership project, to use the academic jargon – probably doesn't get very far. And in a way, that is the right lesson to draw. It's certainly not inconsistent with the story I've just told. Moses never sees *himself* as anything *other* than God's instrument – and it's worth noting that it is in the Exodus sequence, though in the book of Deuteronomy, that we come across what's sometimes called the greatest commandment, one that makes an important appearance in the New Testament too: “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”¹ To which Jesus added, of course – “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself”, always worth remembering in the living of *these* days.

¹ Deuteronomy 6, verse 5

We can hope that God's task for *us* does not require the strength – and certainly not the ruthlessness -- that God's task for Moses did. But we can remember that it is the willingness of Moses to love God with all his heart and all his soul and all his strength that allows him to take and use the tools and gifts God gives him. *That* is what turns an elderly shepherd into an armed prophet. We, too, can listen for God's call. We, too, can arm ourselves for whatever our task may be. That much, we can do. And if nothing else, as we approach our own individual mission of political leadership, let me suggest we do so with endless patience; with an eye to the redemption even of those who seem hopeless; and with a commitment to God's vision even when no one else seems to share it.

May it be so. Amen.