

August 30, 2019

Exodus 3:1-15

Matthew 16:21-28

Another Way

When I think about leadership, I remember taking a group of confirmands on a retreat. There were confirmation classes there from a number of places and they were given a variety of tasks around what it meant to be a church member. The activity I remember best was each group was asked to think about the qualities they would look for in a new pastor and they were given a profile of that church – things like church size, location, particular attributes – like many congregants spoke Spanish or many were farm families, etc. The kids really worked at this asking good questions and making careful observations. At the end of the activity all the groups were called together and asked to share their lists. Some of the items were to be expected – sermons that connected with members of the congregation, willing to work with the youth as well as the adults – there were many great ideas or hopes, but at the very end one youth shouted out that this Pastor needed to “walk on water”. We all laughed but we also recognized that often when we’re looking for leaders, we expect someone well beyond regular. I’ve heard someone here say, “we need a Moses to lead us”. Well, today we get to look at Moses’ call to leadership.

We last encountered Moses as he had been rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. Because his mother had a role in his early life, we can probably assume he learned something of his Hebrew roots though he was raised in the household of the Pharaoh. As a young man, Moses is out among the Hebrew people and he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. He takes matters into his own hands and kills the Egyptian and hides his body in the sand. The next day he encounters two Hebrew men fighting, challenging the one he saw as wrong only to be called to account for his own wrongdoing. Recognizing that his action might be reported, he flees heading to Midian. It seems he is able to settle into a comfortable life there as a shepherd with a wife and son so who would want to change. He may be far enough from the events in Egypt, but he’s not far from God - hence the encounter with the burning bush. God’s opening plea is that God has heard the cries of the people because they are oppressed. I’ve no doubt that Moses could say “amen” to God’s observation of the struggles of the Hebrew people, but his reply is certainly not an excited affirmation of a call to serve. It’s more like ‘why do you think I’m qualified for that job?’ He may even wonder if he’s still on the “wanted list” for killing the Egyptian. Besides, I have a pretty good life right here. But God persists. He doesn’t cite a list of Moses’ qualifications but tells him “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you.” Moses knows if he says ‘yes’ to this calling he’ll not only have to convince the Hebrew people, but he’ll be tasked with convincing Pharaoh. So, he asks what to tell all those people who will wonder why

they should follow him; “who should I tell the people has sent me?” He knows by this time that the One he is conversing with is the same God who was with his ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – but that’s not enough. He asks for God’s name. What God gives him is something like - I AM WHO I AM – or I will be who I will be. It has been a cause for speculation for generations – a mysterious possibility – but Moses finally agrees to this leadership responsibility, relying on the fact that God will be with him.

Within the reading for today, that’s as much as we get to know. But if we read on, we learn that Moses faced a number of challenges from people who thought his leadership should produce something different for them. They didn’t ask him to walk on water but they did want water, better food, clearer directions. Isn’t that the way with leaders – we are happy to have them take the responsibility, but then we aren’t always happy with the results of their leadership.

The Gospel reading offers a bit of a twist on that theme. Just a few verses earlier Jesus has asked his disciples, “who do people say that I am.” And there are a variety of answers, but it is Peter who says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”, and Jesus blesses him for what he has said. Peter is now “rock” and foundation for the church. But no one checks out what Peter understands about being a *messiah*. For many, the awaited messiah was expected to turn things right-side-up. Jesus had been doing wonderful things – healing the sick, caring for the poor, teaching about God’s kingdom, but all that didn’t amount to making the world around them which was dominated by the Roman Empire turn right-side-up. So, what do you think Peter’s expectation is when he announces Jesus as Messiah? Peter goes from being praised to being called Satan within a short span of time when he tells Jesus that the suffering Jesus predicts for himself must never happen to him. This is such a tough passage! Though none of the other disciples say anything, we have the sense they agree with Peter. Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that as his followers they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. These are hard words. Does this mean God really wants us to suffer? Jesus offers that those who want to save their life will lose it but those who lose their life for my sake will gain it. That part has long troubled me, but what I’ve come to believe is that Jesus is challenging his disciples and us not to fear taking on challenges that may seem risky because if we do that in our work of following him, we will gain our lives. I don’t think he means doing stupid things, but there are times in the struggle for justice – like the kinds of things we heard John Lewis standing for – that may be dangerous. I think too of the women who worked for voting rights. Until recently I had not heard parts of that story – that women were thrown in jail and some even died struggling for a voice in our government. That was probably not on Jesus agenda, but struggles to overcome poverty, inequality and injustice were. And some of those struggles are part of our world today.

Jesus’ leadership may call us to places we would rather not go – call us to face our fears and work our way through them. As he leads he asks us to follow – to follow on a way toward a life of meaning – toward abundant life. We live in a world that counts on us to be afraid and thus keep approving of wars and neglect those in need. (Just look at our defense budget compared to what we offer for healthcare or social welfare.)

Jesus' enemies counted on his fear of death to shut him up and keep him out of the way, but Jesus listened to God and did not let fear stop him. He saw something that was far better – a hope that lay beyond fear – and he kept faithful to what God called him to. To follow him – to allow him to be our leader may lead us beyond our own comfort and safety. It may call us to share of our resources in ways we'd rather be guarded about. It may call us to include parts of God's family, people we are not always comfortable with. To be sure – we'll be stretched, but God also promises we'll be blessed with all the possibilities of God's kingdom.