

Moses' Mid-life Crisis

6th Weekend after Pentecost – June 25/26, 2005
Sermon Background Study

Exodus 2:11-22 (NRSV)

¹¹One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. ¹²He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?” ¹⁴He answered, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” ¹⁵When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. ¹⁶The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. ¹⁷But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. ¹⁸When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” ¹⁹They said, “An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” ²⁰He said to his daughters, “Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread.” ²¹Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. ²²She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.”

We all face crises of one sort or another. Certainly, the mid-life crisis can be a nightmare, threatening to blow up our lives. But a mid-life crisis can also be healthy, a time of wise personal reflection that puts us on a new course for the next stage of our lives.

Moses stands as a giant among the people of God. The one chosen by God to lead the Hebrews out of slavery. The one to whom God reveals his name and presents his covenant with Israel.¹ A giant. And we don’t usually think of giants as having mid-life crises. Yet, that is exactly where we find Moses in today’s passage from Exodus. The life he thought he had under control was about to be thrown into chaos.

A life under control

Moses was born at exactly the wrong time. Fearing the growing number of Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies – including Moses. In order to save her baby, Moses’ mother had placed the infant in a small waterproof basket and set him afloat on the Nile river, hoping that someone would save him. Someone did. And not just any someone, but the daughter of Pharaoh herself. Though she knew the baby was a Hebrew, she “took pity on him” and plucked him out of the water. Seeing all this, Pharaoh’s sister (yes, it seems the like the whole family is ignoring Pharaoh’s orders) sought out a woman who could nurse the newborn, finding Moses’ mother – of all people. When Moses was old enough to be weaned, his mother brought him to the palace where Pharaoh’s daughter raised him as her own.

It’s not hard to imagine what Moses’ life was like. Being raised as a member of Pharaoh’s household meant a life of privilege and luxury. It was a life beyond the imagining of Moses’ fellow Hebrews who labored as slaves to their Egyptian masters. Moses’ stepmother must have told him about the circumstances of his birth, though surely it was a secret held among the two of them and Pharaoh’s sister. Still, I wonder how that knowledge affected Moses. Was he troubled by it? Did he simply accept his own “luck”? I’m actually a little inclined to the latter, for it seems that Moses lived just fine with the knowledge for forty years.

¹Let’s get straight what we mean by “Israel.” “Israel” was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name “Israel,” which in Hebrew means something like “one who strives with God.” From that time on, the name “Israel” would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God’s people, as in the twelve tribes of “Israel.” Later, it would take on national or political meaning as well. Thus, David would be the king of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that “Israel” sometimes refers to the covenant people of God and at other times refers to a political entity. This can get even more confusing when we remember that the David’s kingdom of Israel splits in two after the death of his son, Solomon. The divided kingdoms were Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

In our society, forty² is only approaching middle age but in Moses' world, where the average life span was fifty years or so for the privileged, forty was well into the late stages of middle age. Bearing in mind that forty is often a symbolic number in the Bible, Moses was certainly well along in his life when it was turned upside down.

A life turned upside down

Why, after so long a time, does Moses identify with his fellow Hebrews? Why does he care so much that he is willing to kill an Egyptian to save a Hebrew slave from a beating? Perhaps this is how it is with our mid-life crises. We reach a point in life when so much of what we have assumed about ourselves and our world is called into question. It would be foolish to speculate too long about Moses' motivations, but his aims are clear. He will stand up for the Hebrews, or at least for one.

When Moses kills the Egyptian, he knows exactly what he has done. He tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up the murder but word gets out and Moses has to flee. So he heads out into the land of Midian. You

could hardly imagine a less hospitable place.

One day Moses is sitting by a well, perhaps reflecting on how he possibly ended up in such a place, when he comes to the aid of seven sisters and marries one.

After all this, we are told that God heard the cries of the Hebrews and remembered his covenant with Abraham. "God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:25). And Moses would soon see a bush that burned without being consumed.

God's purposes

Before Moses goes over to check out the burning bush, there is no mention that Moses was the least bit aware of God nor that he had any real comprehension of what it meant to be a Hebrew. He was simply playing life's cards as they were dealt him. Even the bush is, at first, only a curiosity.

Perhaps this is how it is with God. We so often look for God's "big stuff" that we fail to appreciate that God works through the ordinary events of our lives. Just because we don't see God at work doesn't mean that he is idle. It is impossible to pull apart God's workings in this story from those of Pharaoh, Moses' mother, Pharaoh's daughter, and the rest. Perhaps we shouldn't try, but simply acknowledge and proclaim that God's good purposes will play out even in something as common as a mid-life crisis. Certainly, I, for one, have my own mid-life crisis story to tell about God and his surprising purposes.

The Basics of Moses' Story

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendents (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500-1300 BC, Moses is born, is raised in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, Moses sees, in the distance, a bush that is burning, yet is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that he is to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am." Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God presses on. Thus, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, and relents only when God sends death to all the first-born of Egypt. Death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb. After the final plague, the Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the sea.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant. Moses leads them to the edge of the land God has promised them. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the Hebrews turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until all of that generation die. Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses' final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses' death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

²The writer of Exodus tells us that Moses had his mid-life crisis when he was "grown up" (Exodus 11:1). In Acts 7:23, we learn that Moses was forty when he killed the Egyptian. Later in Acts 7, we learn that Moses was eighty when God came to him at the burning bush (Exodus 3). You may be wondering why all this is in the New Testament book of Acts. Most of Acts 7 is devoted to a long speech made by the disciple Stephen in his own defense before the Jewish leaders. Stephen relates the long history of Israel in the hopes that the leaders will see that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story and hope. The leaders do not repent and Stephen is stoned to death, making him the first Christian martyr. The man who would become known as the apostle Paul was present at Stephen's stoning, fully approving and holding coats for those who wanted to throw stones.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Moses)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 1:1 – 2:10 The story of Moses' birth</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 3 Moses at the burning bush. God reveals the name of God – YHWH.</p>
<p>Day 3 Exodus 11 Moses warns Pharaoh of the final plague – the death of the firstborn. Pharaoh remains defiant.</p>	<p>Day 4 Exodus 12:1 – 13:16 The Passover. Jesus would reshape this meal around himself at the Last Supper – the old exodus would become a new exodus.</p>
<p>Day 5 Exodus 19 & 20 The people arrive at Mt. Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain where God gives him the tablets containing the Ten Commandments.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

June Book Recommendation

What's So Amazing About Grace, by Philip Yancey

Here it is in a nutshell: "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less." Grace is one of those words that we throw around a lot, but I wonder how much we really understand it. Yancey writes, "Grace is our last best word . . . it contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the sun." Like the other Yancey books I've recommended, I'm confident that you will both enjoy this book and get a lot out of it.

You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for God

A new Sunday morning four-week teaching series with Scott Engle

9:30 in Wesley Hall – begins July 17th

In April, Rev. Hasley asked the congregation to write on an index card the one question they would most like to ask God. We had nearly 150 responses. We've reviewed and organized the questions. Beginning July 17th, Rev. Halsey will preach a four-week sermon series in which he will begin tackling some of the questions. Also, Scott Engle will teach a four week series at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on the questions for God. We hope that you'll join us for this exciting series as we seek to understand better God, ourselves, and our world.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Some of us have experienced a mid-life crisis. Most of us have at least seen one in action. Some are healthy. Some are silly. Some are destructive. You might spend a little time talking about mid-life crises. What do we mean by it? Where do they come from? Do we all eventually experience one, or perhaps more than one? Why is it some are healthy and some destructive? What advice would you give to a friend who seems to be embarking on a mid-life crisis of one sort or another?

Try to imagine yourself into Moses' mid-life crisis. What do you think led him out among the Hebrews? What could possibly have motivated him to murder the Egyptian overseer? Beating a slave would hardly have qualified as a crime. What do you think would have become of Moses had there been no crisis? A lifetime of ceremonial dinners and assorted entertainments?

Finally, you might reflect on God's purposes. How does God work in our lives? How does God work with what we do with our lives? How do we ever sort this out? We talk much about finding God's will. What do you think God's will was for Moses? Did God desire for Moses to murder the Egyptian or did God work with Moses' own choices? Do God's purposes sometimes move forward despite us?