

God's People in Wilderness: Disruptions, Distractions, and Redirection

Exodus 2:11-15 and 2:23 through 3:15

Continuing the story (from where 2:15 left off)... Moses flees to the wilderness of Midian, and on one occasion comes to the defense of a group of women gathered at a well, sisters who are trying to water their sheep but are getting harassed by some male shepherds. Moses fends them off, the women are able to water their sheep, and the sisters' father, the priest of Midian (Jethro) hears about it, and—long story short—Moses ends up marrying one of the daughters, whose name is Zipporah, and they start a family. Now we pick up the story in 2:23.

Exodus 2:23-3:15

23 After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

3Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When

the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'⁵ Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'⁶ He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send **you** to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'¹¹ But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'¹² He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

13 But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?'¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."'

This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

The rest of chapter three is a continuation of this back and forth where God declares what he will do, through Moses, in delivering his people, and of Moses' efforts to wiggle out of it with a whole bunch of what-ifs and fears and "Who am I to do this?", and God finally replies with a question (4:1): "Moses, what is that in your hand?" And of course, it's his shepherd's staff. And God gives Moses a little demonstration of what that simple shepherd's staff can do, with his power.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

In this series we've been looking at people in wilderness and asking a couple of questions: What was going on in their life that brought them to this place of wilderness? What do they experience in wilderness, and what do they learn? And what happens as God brings them out of it?

Moses is perhaps the classic wilderness story. The Biblical character whose life story we are perhaps most familiar with: he was born a Hebrew, and raised for the first few months of his life by his birth mother. But when Pharaoh tries to murder all of the Hebrew children because the people are becoming too numerous, after hiding baby Moses for a few months his mother eventually floats him down the Nile river in a basket, to protect him, in hopes that he is found and rescued by a caring person. So she walks along the riverbank and follows the floating baby and watches as Pharaoh's daughter finds him, notices that he is a beautiful Hebrew baby, and she has pity on him. Pharaoh's daughter asks one of her attendants to go and find a Hebrew woman to nurse and raise him, before he is returned to her and adopted by her as her own child once he is of age. Lo and behold, the woman they find to nurse and raise him is... his birth mother! Unbeknownst to them.

No doubt during those formative years Moses' mother taught him the ways of the Hebrew people, and of their God and their faith. Moses heard the stories; he learned the habits. So even though Moses lived his young adult and adult life among the Egyptian people, he knew who he was as Hebrew. He had a sense of his identity, his background, and where he came from. And all this without an Ancestry DNA test!

And so, as our passage opens, the one David read for us where Moses appears on the scene as an adult, even though by now he has no doubt been incorporated into Egyptian life and culture, he still carries with him his strong roots of identity as a Hebrew. So much so that he can see—really see—his people, and the oppression of his people at the hands of the Egyptians. And when Moses sees an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Hebrew people, he lost it and took action.

So, what is one of the first things we learn about Moses? Moses had a temper. We see that throughout his life, even during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings where Moses loses it from time to time with the people who complain, and sometimes loses it with God for getting him into this leadership role.

Part of his anger, if we could reframe this a bit, is a deep concern for justice, and rightness (righteousness). There is a righteous indignation at work in him, which comes from a good place (even if it led to a bad result of his actions). From early on in his life he has a deep concern for his people, who are being oppressed. And he acts impulsively on this by killing the Egyptian. We see this deep concern for his people again when two Hebrew kinsfolk are fighting. Moses is a mediator, and he wants to see right, and do right, by his people. But as we heard, the murder was witnessed, and he is called out on it, and it causes a radical redirection of his life.

Moses is a good example of someone who, out of a good heart and a deep compassion, makes bad decisions once in a while. I know, homicide is more than just a bad decision. However, what we see is a real human being who can be impulsive and occasionally lose self-control. Can any of us relate to that? Not necessarily with having a temper, but with some aspect of our personality and core wiring that sometimes gets the best of us. And maybe gets us in trouble sometimes. Even if it comes from a good place. Sometimes strengths have a shadow side to them—our greatest strength can also be our greatest weakness, under certain conditions. And Moses is a good example of that.

And out of the impulsive action on Moses' part comes the first big disruption in his life. Moses flees to the wilderness. For a long time—40 years we are told later on. We might even say that it was Moses' *sin* that sent him into the wilderness. Hold this thought, because we are going to see that nothing goes to waste in God's economy. Even an impulsive decision on a person's part can be used by God for good down the road. I'll come back to this.

Let's take a moment, and pause for reflection: think of a disruption in your life. Whether it was because of a decision or action on your part, or because it was brought upon you from outside forces beyond in your control. Think of something that changed the trajectory of your journey and set you on a different course. Where did the new trajectory take you?

We're all experiencing a major disruption in our lives, and in our collective life as a society, and our collective life as a church because of covid. What do we do with the disruptions in our lives? Go with it? Despair of it? Make the best of it? Seek God in it? As we've noticed so far in these wilderness journeys, no one comes out the other end of wilderness the same person, or the same people. By design. That's the goal of wilderness: to be a transformative experience.

After his disruption, Moses flees to the wilderness, to a place called Midian. In Moses' *disruption*, during his time in the wilderness for many years, now employed as a shepherd, he experiences a major *distraction* (or, maybe we should call this disruption #2). God speaks to him in an unlikely way, in the famous burning bush.

Moses could've just walked on by, and let the distraction pass. Or run away from it because it was weird. But he was curious. I love the way that it's put in Exodus: "Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight...'" And so here is something else we learn about Moses, which perhaps the wilderness taught him: he is curious; open to holy distraction; attentive to the unusual.

And I love it that this burning bush experience happened *while Moses was doing something ordinary*. He was just walking along with the sheep he was tending. He wasn't attending a conference, or a religious service. To our knowledge he wasn't even praying or meditating or seeking an ecstatic experience, or asking for a sign from God. God just showed up on the fuzzy edge of his vision, and Moses turned aside to see what was going on. That makes his attentiveness and curiosity all the more remarkable because he wasn't looking for

or asking for an out-of-the-ordinary experience. Moses had learned to be attentive in the ordinary.

And this is another thing that wilderness can teach us: to become more attentive; to slow down enough to become curious about the distractions, especially during the ordinary, everyday things we do.

Moses turns aside, approaches this flaming shrub, and for a while he's probably sorry he did! Maybe wishes he could just keep on leading the sheep to pasture. But God grabs his attention there in two significant ways: first, he calls him by name. That would get my attention in a hurry!

Then, God speaks to Moses' heart directly, by revealing God's own heart to him. God says: "I am the God of your ancestors (remember them, Moses?) I have heard the cry of my people, who are suffering on account of their taskmasters." It's brilliant because God is saying to Moses: "Remember *your* deep concern for the welfare of your people? Remember how indignant *you* felt when they were being mistreated? Do you remember who you are? We have the same heart, Moses. I am their God and your God, and I want to reignite that fire that you had, and that I have, and send you to my people—your people—to lead them out of Egypt."

God doesn't start with, "Go and confront Pharaoh." If God did that, I'm sure Moses would've said, "I'm out. See ya." Rather, God revealed his heart. Which was Moses' heart too. So, God's got him hooked!

Even so, as we heard, Moses expresses a lot of doubt. Doubt about himself, and doubt about God. Who are you? And, who am I to do this?

God has two responses to the doubts and fears that Moses brings:

First, is simply two words: "I am." In Hebrew it's actually one word. In the face of Moses' doubts and fears, God says "I am." The Hebrew is a little difficult to translate: Most often as: "I am." Sometimes as: "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." Could also be translated: "I am the one that is" or "I am always is-ing."

It's this present tense, verb name. But whatever it means, if you look at it, it doesn't seem like a great comfort to Moses at first: "I am?!? What does that mean??" It actually seems a little unsettling to Moses. I think he was looking for a little more clarity from God.

Yet, this is God's answer to Moses' fears and doubts. God is almost making a pun here with his name; it's a marvelous play on words: Moses keeps asking,

“*Who am I* to deliver Israel?” “*Who am I* to confront pharaoh?” “*Who am I* to speak to the people?” And God responds: “I am.”

God reverses Moses’ self-focus: his “Who am I?” questions become God’s “I am” answer. The issue, when God calls us to follow and serve is not “Who am I?” The issue is “Who is this ‘I Am’ that goes with me?”

Btw, this is a foreshadowing of all of the I Am statements of Jesus in John’s gospel... I am the good shepherd; I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; and so on. These are all positive assurances of who he is and of his presence with us. Do we believe that God, the great I Am, is with us wherever we go?

God’s **second** response to Moses’ fear and doubt comes in the form of a question. In the midst of *Moses’* questioning, God asks *him* a question: “What is that in your hand?” Well, it’s a shepherd’s staff. A common, ordinary, everyday thing. If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all, right?

But it’s that simple staff that’s going to send 10 plagues on Egypt; it’s that simple staff that will part the red sea; it’s that simple staff that will draw water from a rock in the wilderness so that people can live.

It's an ordinary thing, but with God it became extraordinary. Think about what this staff represented, in terms of preparing Moses, in the wilderness, for what God was now calling him to:

The staff represented that Moses had learned how to live in the desert wilderness for 40 years. An ordinary skill, unless what you need to do is lead the people in desert wilderness for 40 more years.

And here is where I come back to a very important footnote to this: God uses a consequence of Moses' impulsive action, his sin if you will, to prepare him for leadership. How does he know how to lead people in the desert wilderness? After killing the Egyptian he fled into the wilderness and learned how to live there. I know this sounds odd, but Moses' sin put him in a place where he would be prepared for service and leadership. God used it. This is the great economy of God's ways; nothing from our lives goes to waste; not even our mistakes, or our suffering or pain; our good decisions and our bad decisions. God can use it all. So this staff represented that Moses knew how to live in the desert wilderness.

The staff also represents the fact that Moses is a shepherd, and had been for a long time. Again, an ordinary skill, until you think about it: working with sheep for many years is probably not bad training for someone who is about to

'shepherd' a people through wilderness for many years. It requires patience and skill.

An ordinary thing in his hand, and ordinary experiences become good training. As with Moses, God uses the ordinary item or experience that we already have in *our* hand, and he transforms it and makes it extraordinary for his purposes.

So, what's in ***your*** hand? Capitol One wants to know: what's in your *wallet*? And God wants to know that too, because it all belongs to God—including our finances. But this question God asks, "What's in your hand?," is the larger and better question, because it's a more holistic approach to life and faith and to a response to God's call.

God wants us to know that we already possess what is needed to serve and bless others. Our experiences, our training, our skills, our past times in wilderness that taught us and equipped us, our present time in wilderness, become the ordinary thing that God can transform for extraordinary use.

And I wonder, as we reflect on this past year, if any of us have discovered that we have something in our hand we didn't even realize we had. Or, we have

re-learned something or re-discovered something that was lost, or forgotten. A skill, a desire, an energy toward helping others. Something that came back to us.

For example, I saw a news piece about people who have returned to some knitting projects that had been sitting for years (and this includes men!) who had *that* burning bush call out to them, and they turned aside, and took up that ordinary thing and made blankets and mittens and caps for the homeless.

This is not to make anyone feel guilty if they haven't done something like that! For some of us this may be the year of "Dang it, I wish I would've done _____ while I had the time!" The point is, we can start whenever!

St. Patrick's story: According to the *Confession of Saint Patrick*, he was born in Britain, and at the age of sixteen he was captured by a group of Irish pirates. They took him to Ireland where he was enslaved and held captive for six years. Patrick writes in the *Confession* that the time he spent in captivity was critical to his spiritual development. He explains that the Lord had mercy on his youth and ignorance, and afforded him the opportunity to be forgiven his sins. While in captivity, he worked as a shepherd and strengthened his relationship with God through prayer, eventually leading him to convert to Christianity. And the rest of the story is, as we know, that he became a great missionary to, and in,

Ireland. A major disruption, a time in wilderness, training as a shepherd, and he discovered that what was in his hand was a deep faith and a fire in his belly for the very people who captured him.

What is wilderness teaching you, and me? How is God speaking to you? As we emerge, slowly, from our collective wilderness, what will be the work that God calls us to, and encourages us in by identifying and empowering what is in our hands?