

Series: Joy in the Journey

Today: Moses—Doing What God Commands

Text: Exodus 33:12-34:7

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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I received an email this week from a faithful family who has decided to prepare themselves each week during this series on the journeys of faith of the great biblical characters in the Bible. They have decided to study the personalities of the Bible we will be studying in this series and use those personalities for their family devotions. This week the mom and dad knew we would be looking at the journey of Moses. When they got to the Ten Commandments, and the father asked, *“Who knows how many commandments God gave to Moses?”* Their five year old son chimed in without missing a beat, *“Too many!”* was his reply.

When it comes to the pivotal faith journeys in the Bible, the journey of Moses is yet another key one. It is one of the many salvation stories in the Old Testament which reveals God’s intention to save the people of Israel. We who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ know that this intention culminates in His life, death and resurrection, extending grace to you and to me. So far we have seen God’s intention in the stories of Abraham, Noah, and Joseph. Today we focus on Moses.

The story of Moses is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. He was born in Egypt about 350 years after his ancestor, Jacob, had arrived there to escape the drought in Canaan. Jacob’s family stayed in Egypt and they grew rapidly. They grew so fast that Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, perceived their presence to be a threat to his power. At first he tried to slow their birth rate by working them to exhaustion in the building of entire cities. When

that plan failed, he ordered that all the new born Israelites be thrown into the Nile River (Exodus 1:22).

Jochebed, the mother of Moses obeyed the order, but not exactly as it was intended. She hid her son for three months hoping he would not be discovered, but when things became bad, she devised a plan to save him. She created a basket of reeds, sealed it with tar, and placed him near the place where Pharaoh's wife regularly came to bathe. Moses was rescued, taken into Pharaoh's home, and was raised as a prince.

Everything was going well until one day Moses, who had always known he was not Egyptian but Jewish, saw one of Pharaoh's slave masters abusing a fellow Jew, and he killed him. Out of fear, he fled to Midian where he married, raised a family, made his living as a shepherd, and intended live in exile for the rest of his life.

Moses was 80 years old when he heard the voice of the Lord commanding him to go back to Egypt and say to the Pharaoh, "*Let my people go.*" Now imagine yourself: 80 years old, a fugitive from justice, being told to go back to the place where there is a warrant for your arrest; a place where you will surely be executed; and the only thing you have for your protection is a promise: "*I will be with you.*" (Exodus 3:10) Would you do it? Moses did. Would you?

Moses went to Pharaoh and made his demand, with the help of his brother Aaron. Pharaoh did not cooperate, but Moses was persistent. He prophesied 10 plagues that would come on the land, and come they did. When the last one came, the death of all the first born Egyptians and the saving of all the first born Jews, Pharaoh was convinced. He let them go. He later decided this wasn't such a great idea, and he chased after them through the Red Sea, but for now, he let them go.

There is way too much of a story here to cover all the details in one short sermon, but I want us to skip forward to our text for this morning where we encounter what we encounter over and over again in the faith journey of Moses. He did what God commanded, even when it did not serve his own self interest; even when it could have cost him his life.

Our text for this morning comes right after that scene which we know from the movie, *The Ten Commandments*. Moses has received the commandments on Mount Sinai. They were written by the hand of God on two stone tablets, but when he returns to share them with the Israelites, he discovers that they have made a golden calf and were worshipping this idol as if it were God. He was so angry that he threw the tablets down and they were broken. He chastises the people for their lack of faith, and sets up a tent outside the encampment where people come and go hoping to receive the blessing of God. Scripture says that God spoke to Moses there as one friend speaks to another (Exodus 33:11). In the intimacy of that relationship, he begs for God's mercy on behalf of the people.

It is here that the theme of his life journey plays out once again. He did what the Lord asked him to do, and because of his faithfulness, God promises not to punish those who repent and return to the relationship for which God longs. However, for those who will not repent, God promises that the sins of the fathers will be visited on the children and their children's children for generations to come.

Allow me to share two quick lessons from the journey of Moses: 1) the journey of Moses is a journey built upon being faithful to God's commands. And second, when we fail to do what God commands, we suffer the consequences; and not only us, but our families, as well. The journey of Moses is about faithfulness and consequences.

Faithfulness

Faithfulness in the journey of Moses is seen again and again. It is not a blind faithfulness. It is not a faithfulness we often see on bumper stickers: *"The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."* It is a faithfulness which argues with God; questions God; tries to run away from God, gets angry with the people of God, but in the end Moses does what it is that God asks him to do. He goes to Pharaoh. He risks being seen as a fool when he warns Pharaoh of the coming plagues if he fails to let the Israelites go. He commands the people to mark the door posts with the blood of the lamb. He stands at the edge of the Red Sea and commands the waters to part. He leads the people to a place where he can see the Promised Land; even though he, himself, is never allowed to enter it. The journey of Moses is a journey of faithfulness and putting his faith into action.

Cherie and I have had many life shaping events together in our nearly forty years of marriage. One of them I have told you about before: our visit to *Koinonia Farm* in Americus, Georgia. *Koinonia* was founded in 1940 by Clarence Jordan as a haven for racial unity and cooperation in the deep south as a witness to the inclusive love of God. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home. In the midst of the raid, Jordan recognized the voice of a local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter showed up for a story about the arson while the rubble was still smoldering. He found Jordan in a field, planting seeds. He said to Jordan, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued his prodding, with no response from Jordan. Finally, the reporter said, *"Dr. Jordan, you've got two Ph.D.'s, you've put 14 years into this farm, and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've*

been?" With that statement, Jordan stopped hoeing. He said to the reporter, "You just don't get it, do you? You don't understand. What Christians are about is not success. We are about faithfulness." [Source: *Kevin Conrad, "Wisdom for Faithful Living Today," SermonNotes.com*]

My friends, the journey of Moses reminds us that each of us is called to do what God commands. It doesn't mean we can't question, or doubt, or argue. However, when we have questioned God and doubted God and argued with God, the call remains the same. We are called to put into action the truth we receive.

Consequences

Our passage ends with an important reminder. The grace of God is free, but it is not cheap. Listen to word of the Lord to Moses: ⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, *"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

We worship a God of love and mercy. We also worship a God of justice. There are consequences to be paid for our willful disobedience; consequences we cannot always see. When we fail to be good stewards of the creation entrusted to our care and disrupt the laws of nature, we change our climate and we suffer the consequences of global warming; not only now, but for generations to come. When we fail to pursue recovery from our addictive behaviors, we harm not only our own bodies, but we harm those who love us and the pain is often acted out for generations to come as they try to repair the damage that has been done.

A colleague tells the story of a young man who called late at night and asked if he would meet with him the next morning. The next morning they met at a restaurant for breakfast, and the

young man told of a recent business trip he had stayed too late at the hotel bar with a woman colleague. The alcohol, distance from home, and easy laughter the two shared had led to the obvious. They ended up in bed together. "Now what?" asked the man.

My colleague said he took a deep breath. He thought of the young wife and small children whose lives could be so terribly affected by a night of indiscretion. To preserve the family, he briefly considered advising the young man to cover up the error, but then the consequences of establishing such a spiritual pattern convinced him that honesty was the path to follow. So the pastor asked him a series of questions:

- Had he prayed to ask God's forgiveness and pardon?
- Had he confessed his sin to the young woman involved and told her that the intimacy would never happen again?
- Had he confessed his wrong to his wife and asked her forgiveness?
- And, if he was not yet ready to do this, had he at least arranged to have an AIDS test? For until he had been tested, he could not approach the marriage bed without endangering his wife and the child she was expecting.

The young man listened to each of the questions without expression or comment. When the pastor finished, the young man pushed his breakfast plate away from him, leaned back in his seat, and said, "I came for grace, not for discipline. You disappoint me, Pastor."

The words cut my colleague's heart. He did not wonder if what he had said on this occasion was wrong. He wondered, rather, what he had said in the past that would lead an intelligent, capable man such as this to believe the promises of grace mean we will never have to face any consequences of wrongdoing. [Source: *Bryan Chapell, Holiness By Grace (Crossway Books, 2001)*]

The patience of God is limitless. The mercy of God is beyond human understanding. However, the consequence of human sinfulness cannot be avoided. With any luck, if we are

honest with ourselves, we may have a chance to participate in the healing of those we harm, but there are no guarantees.

Conclusion

The journey of Moses is our journey. He did what God Commanded, and he accepted the consequences of his own lack of faith by never being able to enter the Promised Land. In our own journeys of faith, may we follow the example of Moses: his faithfulness, and accepting the consequences of our disobedience.