



AMBUSHED ON THE HIGHWAY CALLED HOME

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Exodus 4:18-31
Eighth Message
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Last week, a group from our Twenty Something singles ministry returned from a missions ministry in Romania. Their preparations for the trip were a reminder that planning and travel can be far more stressful than the actual ministry. Pressures at work, sickness, tense family relationships, and travel plans led to elevated stress levels prior to their departure. On Good Friday, just before they were due to leave, one young woman called home to say goodbye to her mother, only to find that she had died suddenly. Another young woman was taken to the hospital that same night. The team left for Romania physically sick, weary and emotionally drained. On their return, several reported that while preparations felt like a "war zone," the ministry itself was a taste of heaven.

This morning we come to just such a text in our studies from the book of Exodus which describe Moses' transition from Midian to Egypt. Many scholars see this as a haphazard compilation of various diverse fragments, with no unifying theme and holding little relevance to Moses' ministry. One calls it "one of the loosest sequences in the Book of Exodus."¹ I disagree. Though the text is filled with many uncertainties and ambiguities as Moses makes the journey back to Egypt after forty years, it is carefully shaped around the theme of family. Each scene is filled with intimate family touches juxtaposed with momentous life and death issues foreshadowing what will occur in Egypt. As Fretheim states, "The various vignettes, so filled with ambiguity, serve to highlight this, intensifying the fact that there are momentous matters at stake here, for both God and Israel."²

The first two scenes portray Moses' departure from his family in Midian; the last two scenes focus on his reunion with Aaron and the elders at Sinai and in Egypt. At the center is a surprising near-death experience, which brings to the surface momentous issues of life and death. Our purpose this morning will be to see how important these "transition" times are in life, and the issues that are at stake in these journeys.

The Shape of the Journey

A Leaving the physical family in Midian (4:18)

B God's command Moses to start the journey with assurance (4:19-23)

X Near-death experience: Divine ambush (4:24-26)

- a God seeks to put Moses to death
- b Zipporah intercedes for Moses with vicarious blood
- a' God leaves Moses alone

B' God's command to Aaron to join the journey with joy (4:27-28)

A' Reunion of spiritual family in Egypt (4:29-31)

I. Moses asks Permission from Jethro to Leave (4:18)

Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." (Exodus 4:18 NASB)

Having been defeated in his negotiations with God to remain at home in Midian, Moses returns to his father-in-law, Jethro, and politely requests permission to leave. The newly commissioned prophet offers a different motivation than a full-scale liberation of Israel from Egypt, explaining that he wants to see if his brethren are still "alive." Perhaps Moses keeps his diplomatic cards close to the vest to avoid resistance from his father-in-law. It would make no sense to try and explain the complicated negotiations he had just gone through and arouse Jethro's fears for his family. He had experienced enough emotion and resistance for one day. So he appeals to his familial roots, pointing out the severity of the Egyptian oppression of his people as the reason for the mission, hoping to evoke a merciful response from his father-in-law.

Remaining true to his warm and generous character, Jethro sends Moses off with the priestly blessing, "Go in shalom." This man will be a constant ray of sunshine throughout Moses' life (Exod 18). He is a reminder to us of how even people outside the covenant can be a great source of blessing to us. May God grant us all such an in-law, who offers not only blessing but timely wisdom as well!

II. God's Command to Go, and His Assurance (4:19-23)

Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand. (4:19-20)

The fact that God must repeat the command to leave suggests that it took more prodding to get Moses to overcome his fears to leave home and return to Egypt. It must have been extremely difficult for him to face his past, especially when his "wanted poster" had been displayed in every Egyptian post office. Sensitive to Moses' fears, God reassures him that things had changed in Egypt and it was now safe to return, for "all the men who were seeking your life are dead." Moses finally obeys and sets out for Egypt, his family in tow, and God's staff in his hand. As Fretheim notes, "Taking the 'staff of God' indicates an openness to the divine commission, but the absence of direct speech to this effect is striking."³ One wonders whether Moses is still in a state of grudging obedience.

To further bolster the faith of this reluctant messenger, God again spells out in great detail exactly what Moses can expect to occur when he arrives back in Egypt.

The LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. (4:21)

First, God makes clear that they will be working in tandem, each performing different tasks in his confrontation of Pharaoh. Moses will be working wonders with his staff, and God will work within the heart of Pharaoh to intensify the battle. God wants to make sure that Moses knows what an important role he is to play and that he takes his responsibility seriously. And second, once Moses has fulfilled his role, he should not view Pharaoh's resistance as an obstacle to his mission, but as a divine act that guarantees greater success. An intense struggle will ensue and escalate to a climactic confrontation in the battle over the firstborn.

"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'"' (4:22-23)

In the final confrontation the Creator God will lay claim to what is rightfully his, "Israel is My son, My firstborn." As Sarna observes, "All peoples are recognized as being under the universal fatherhood of God, but Israel has the singular status of being the first to acknowledge YHWH and to enter into a special relationship with Him. As such, Israel enjoys God's devoted care and protection."⁴ All parents know the passions that are awakened within them for a suffering child. Such are the passions of God for his children. Once they are awakened he will literally turn the world upside down to reclaim his own.

The major question Exodus seeks to answer is, Who are the sons of Israel? For four hundred years, Pharaoh claimed that the Israelites belonged to him as slaves to build his pyramids. But God insists they are not slaves but sons of the living God, and once they are free they will build his holy dwelling. Pharaoh's persistent refusal to bow down to the Creator and release his son will cost him his own firstborn son. The death of Egypt's firstborn son will save the life of Israel's firstborn son. This truth was so important it became memorialized in the rite of the firstborn and his consecration to God (13:1-2, 11-16). Every Jew knew the purchase price of his freedom: it was the precious blood of a firstborn son.

With these encouraging words Moses sets off for Egypt. Neither he nor the reader is prepared for what happens next, a near-death experience on the highway.

III. Near Death on the Highway! (4:24-26)

Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood"—because of the circumcision. (4:24-26)

God had assured Moses that he need not fear for his life

because of the new situation in Egypt, explaining that though things would be difficult with Pharaoh, success was guaranteed. Following decades with a price on his head, Moses is finally able to breathe a little easier, and on his way to Egypt settles down for a good night's sleep at an inn beside the highway. Suddenly it seems the Lord breaks into his room and tries to kill him. If Moses thought he was safe ("those seeking your life are dead"), he is not ("the Lord sought to put him to death")! As Houtman observes, "How can it be that YHWH himself demolishes what has been achieved so far with much difficulty?"⁵

Readers who are familiar with the stories of the patriarchs might be prepared for a possible conflict with the Lord (as when Jacob wrestled God in the middle of the night), but there is no precedent for this. How can the Lord attack Moses like a demon in the night when Moses is utterly defenseless and is God's willing servant, doing his bidding? Apparently there were some unresolved issues between these two. Both Jewish and early Christian exegetes, and many of the earliest translations (both Greek and Aramaic), try to soften the unthinkable by making the messenger not the "LORD" but "an angel of the LORD." But the text is clear. We must remember that the biblical narrators are never averse to creating inescapable tensions in the presentation of divine history. If you are averse to tension, then don't read the Bible!

Zipporah, Moses' wife, comes to the rescue with quick and decisive intervention. She grabs a sharp flint stone (which may have been used to set the fire for the night), and without hesitation circumcises Moses' son, throwing the bloody foreskin at Moses' feet. However we interpret her actions it is obvious they had the intended effect: in the presence of the blood, God "backed off" and allowed Moses to live.

The only clue for her actions is her emphatic, cryptic cry, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." Some scholars infer that this may be an ancient phrase of the marital relationship, that circumcision was performed as a premarital rite. Regardless of its exact origin, the text seems to indicate that Moses was not in fact circumcised (or perhaps he was partially circumcised, as was sometimes the case in Egypt), nor was his son, and that God was not going to allow him to continue on his mission until this issue was dealt with. How can Israel's future leader lead the nation spiritually when he hasn't brought the blood of the covenant into his own home or personal life through the sign of circumcision? This would be like ordaining a pastor or evangelist who had never made a public confession of faith in baptism. Zipporah saved Moses' life by vicariously circumcising him with the blood of his firstborn son.

Though the text raises more questions than it answers there is no doubt about the grave impression it made upon Moses as to the absolute seriousness of the issue involved. The silence and lack of explanation make the incision all the deeper. In essence, Zipporah became a mirror to Moses of what he would later do for the nation of Israel in Egypt. By taking refuge under the blood of the lamb, Israel would escape the death of their firstborn in Egypt. Any compromise would lead to certain death.

After the horror of this near-death experience, the text immediately turns to the warmth and embrace of familial joys.

IV. Aaron Commanded by God to Join the Journey (4:27-28)

Now the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which He had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him to do. (4:27-28)

God now summons Aaron to meet Moses on his wilderness journey. The responsive brother sets out immediately and just so happens to encounter his brother at the exact spot where Moses earlier had his divine encounter. Timing is everything in the kingdom of God. Beneath the shadow of Sinai these two brothers meet and kiss. In a scene of sheer delight that contrasts greatly with what immediately preceded it, they catch up on all the latest happenings in their lives. Instead of the touch of death there is the embrace and kiss of life. Aaron's kiss seems to unlock Moses' speech. His silent obedience now turns into eager anticipation of all that God is about to do. Nothing is held back. Commenting on the atmosphere, Fretheim makes an astute observation concerning God's ways.

As is often the case, God picks up on quite ordinary human affairs, not least the joy that people have in one another (4:14), and makes use of them for more specific divine purposes. In fact, what such human relationships have become contributes to the use God is able to make of them. God's purposes are less well served when human relationships are not so positive. Aaron greets Moses as a long-lost relative.⁶

Having been on scores of missions trips and weekend retreats, I would agree wholeheartedly. Over and over again I have observed how God uses long-lasting friendships as a platform for significant ministry. One of my joys in working at PBCC is remembering that most of our staff has worked intimately together for over twenty years. When you love and trust someone over a long time, serving together in ministry becomes a joyous dance rather than a duty. Instructions and planning give way to Spirit-led instinct, and reward becomes the appreciation for each unique contribution and the shared joy of the unexpected appearances of God's grace.

United now in familial love and divine commission, the two brothers make their pilgrimage to Egypt.

V. Moses and Aaron Before the Elders (4:29-31)

Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped. (4:29-30)

The brothers' reception in Egypt takes place exactly as the Lord had predicted. Both perform their assigned tasks, with Aaron speaking the message and Moses performing the signs, and the elders believe. But then things proceed even better than expected. When the sons of Israel hear that God was keenly aware of their situation and was ready to intervene out of his deep fatherly concern for them, they worship. Signs evoke belief, but love provokes

grateful awe. Worship is a wonderful seal to divine journeys. It is what released a lot of emotion for Moses. The one who had been run out of town in fear for his life and reluctantly dragged back to Egypt is now at the center of the kingdom of God.

VI. Reflections on the Journey

A. The importance of transition times

If anything, the text highlights the importance of transition times. I take issue with scholars who see this text as a mere compilation of loose fragments pieced together for the purpose of getting Moses from Midian to Egypt. The material is carefully shaped with five encounters of vital importance for the success of his mission. Transition times, when we are saying goodbye to old relationships and embarking on new ones for the sake of the kingdom, are supremely significant. Whether it is graduation from school, entering into marriage, giving birth, getting baptized, embarking on a missions trip, leaving a career, or even losing a loved one, we should never underestimate the importance of these times for family connection and opportunities for worship to celebrate the love of God. It has often been our practice that after a missions trip, the leaders set aside a time of worship for all who went to reflect on the grace and love of God before returning home. These have been some of the richest worship experiences of my life.

B. The integration of family and ministry

Second, I am impressed that in each of the five scenes, Moses is relating to a significant member in his family, whether it is his father-in-law, his wife and son, his brother, or his former elders. The narrator seems to be suggesting that Moses' ministry and his family are integrated. One is not carried out in isolation from the other. Once God has commissioned Moses as founder of the nation, Moses doesn't run off to Egypt, forsaking his family. He makes it his supreme task to connect with everyone in his family. In case we are spiritually dull, the center scene makes the point graphically. Moses' spiritual negligence in his personal life and with his son was of no little concern to God. In a rare show of violence, God comes "out of his skin" to impress upon Moses the life and death necessity of coming under the blood of the covenant through the sign of circumcision. There can be no compromise here.

We must be very careful to not neglect our personal or family responsibilities for ministry. The best ministries are built on healthy marriages, good homes, and solid reputations in the community. As Paul said to Timothy, "An overseer...must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Tim 3:4-5). It is not that we have to be perfect, but that we should be diligent that ministry never becomes an easy escape from unresolved issues in the home. It's tempting to allow accolades in ministry (usually from people who don't really know us) to blind us to who we are at home.

C. The Value of Women

Third, our text speaks to the ministry of women. Just before Moses embarks on his mission he finds himself in a life and death struggle and needs a mediator, "and it is a non-Israelite woman who provides that mediation, saving his life from certain death."⁷ The Old Testament is often

charged with being chauvinistic, yet the narrator of Exodus may be smiling when he asks, "How many women does it take to make one male leader?" Zipporah becomes the sixth woman in Moses' career whose spiritual insight, initiative and courage saves his life. These women play significant roles in Moses' life, their actions foreshadowing the ministry he will have with the nation of Israel. On the eve of Israel's first Passover, the memory of Zipporah's decisive action probably served Moses well as Israel was diligently applying the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their homes. He gave those instructions with conviction, knowing that any compromise would lead to certain death. You women must never forget what an impact your actions have to shape God's future leaders.

D. The Passions of God

But probably the most significant lesson in this "transition journey" is the encounter Moses has with the passions of God. Moses is told at the outset that what is driving this mission is God's parental love for his firstborn son Israel. There is probably no stronger human emotion than the love of a parent for a suffering child. In this journey we learn that God is going to turn the world upside down to rescue this child. In the end it is going to turn violent, with the death of Egypt's firstborn. When Moses arrives in Egypt, he realizes that it is God's love for his people that leads Israel to worship. The powerful, vulnerable, passionate love of God rescuing his people, with no thought of the cost to himself, has a greater impact on Israel than the wonders and miracles of Moses. On this transitional journey, Moses begins to understand in a significant way the relentless love of God.

And yet, how do we reconcile God's intense love with Moses' experience of God's anger and his near-death experience? What happens inside the heart of God when his passion for holiness explodes with more violence than we can take? The prophets of Israel wrestled continually over this conflict, especially when Israel kept wandering off into idolatry. The classic statement of God's relentless, all-consuming paternal love as it conflicts with holiness comes from Hosea 11. Reflecting back over his painful relationship with Israel, God comes to terms within himself concerning which force must finally win out:

**When Israel was a youth I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called My son.
The more they called them,
The more they went from them;
They kept sacrificing to the Baals
And burning incense to idols.
Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them in My arms;
But they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from
their jaws;
And I bent down and fed them. (Hosea 11:1-4)**

And then after describing how even the fiercest judgments of Assyria have not cured her rebellion, like an agonized father, God finally comes to grips with the writhing pain within his own heart and comes to terms with the only thing he can do as a father.

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart is turned over within Me,
All My compassions are kindled.
I will not execute My fierce anger;
I will not destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your
midst,
And I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11:8-9)**

God describes his "comforting" love like a flame set ablaze within his heart, consuming everything in its path, including his holy wrath. Three times he declares that his wrath will not have the final word about Israel's destiny. In the end, we learn that God's compassion is greater than his holy anger. As our parent, he will ultimately suffer the violence himself in the death of his first-born Son in order to save us; and in that way the Holy One will stand in our midst. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is what Moses learned on that dark night on the way to Egypt when he came face to face with the holy heart of God. Once God declares you a son, you are a son forever.

1. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 54.
2. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 75-76.
3. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 76.
4. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 24.
5. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, Vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 425.
6. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 81.
7. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 81.

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