



BORN FOR JUSTICE

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Exodus 2:11-22

Fourth Message

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Did you ever wonder for what purpose you were born? Many people struggle with their calling, but a privileged few seem to know it from a young age. This was certainly true of Moses, the subject of our text today from Exodus. Moses was born to liberate his people from bondage and punish their cruel Egyptian oppressors. Having been miraculously spared from the waters of destruction, and placed in the arms of Pharaoh's daughter, how will he make his debut as liberator of his people?

Early on we all have dreams of greatness. We long to be significant, to hear the applause. God has dreams for us as well, but we seldom understand the "way" of God that leads to greatness. After viewing Moses' miraculous birth, and his being carried off to Pharaoh's court to receive the finest education in Egypt, we are not prepared for what follows. Just when the narrator has lifted our hopes to the pinnacle, we are immediately let down. Our lofty dreams are dashed to the ground in the misery of failure.

Yet what follows is so common to our human experience, it carries with it a ringing clarity of truth. How often have people been miraculously "saved," and committed themselves to serve greater purposes, only to find their initial efforts end in dismal failure? This becomes a defining moment for a Christian. Myriads of questions arise in the soul. Was the whole venture a hoax? Should cynicism replace faith? Should we give up on the dream? Should we give up on God? Should we give up on ourselves? Or is God still committed to his purposes, molding us for something greater? Our text will guide us through some of these dilemmas. It is set in three scenes, all of which center around the theme of justice, the very purpose for which Moses was born.

I. International Justice Imposed by Sight (2:11-12)

Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating (*nakah*) a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down (*nakah*) the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exod 2:11-12 NASB)

After his mother had weaned him, Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. He was raised in Pharaoh's court, and endowed with a privileged education. Sarna describes the high level of education in Egypt:

Like the other privileged boys in royal court and bureaucratic circles in Egypt, he would have commenced his education at the age of four, attending school from early in the morning until noonday for about twelve years. Discipline is known to have been exceedingly strict, with corporal punishment the chief means of its enforcement. One notable proverb frames the education-

al theory thus: "The ears of a boy are on his back; he hears when he is beaten." The school curriculum largely centered on reading, writing, and arithmetic, the second of these subjects receiving special emphasis. The art of penmanship and the cultivation of style were both highly esteemed as the indispensable prerequisites for a sound education. Drill and memorization seem to have been the chief pedagogic techniques.¹

Despite his higher education and the privileges which Egyptian society afforded him, Moses never lost sight of his true identity as a Hebrew. Twice in verse 11, the Hebrews are referred to as his "brethren." "Hebrew" comes from a word meaning "one from beyond, from the other side." The expression is usually found in the mouths of foreigners to distinguish Hebrews from nationals. It could be compared to our derogatory expression, "someone from the other side of the tracks." Because the Egyptians were strict segregationists (they also loathed shepherds), we can imagine the racial slurs and visions of violence that dominated Moses' early memories.

At the age of forty (Acts 7:23), Moses has no tolerance for oppression. The sight of an Egyptian striking (*nakah*) a fellow Hebrew provokes him deeply, unleashing years of pent-up anger over the injustice done to his people. As the rage seethes and builds within, he turns to the right and to the left to make sure there are no witnesses, and then he gives the Egyptian taskmaster a taste of his own medicine, striking him (*nakah*) as he had struck the Hebrew. If we were watching this scene in a movie, we would feel a sense of elation for this example of "eye for an eye" justice. The Gestapo finally gets its just desserts. But this retaliation takes a dreadful turn. Because of the intensity of Moses' rage, his repeated blows become lethal. He does more than strike the offending Egyptian; he kills him, and then quickly buries his deed in the sand.

If we were to evaluate Moses' actions, we might label them "premature" justice. The cause was right, for Moses takes the side of the oppressed. But he has naively inserted himself into the situation, without invitation or calling by God. He judges by what he "sees" (the key verb in the text, used four times), without inquiry or investigation. Impetuously, he acts as prosecutor, judge and executioner, all in one. With no due process granted, the sentence must remain hidden. Moses thought his actions would be well received by his people, and perhaps even spur an uprising against the Egyptians, but the following day, he was met with extreme disappointment. As Stephen would later testify in the book of Acts, "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand" (Acts 7:25).

II. National Justice Refused and Exposed (2:13-14)

He went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews

were fighting with each other; and he said to the offender, "Why are you striking (*nakah*) your companion?" But he said, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and said, "Surely the matter has become known." (2:13-14)

Next day, Moses' reacts even quicker than before, wasting no time in mediating a dispute among his own people. Two of his brethren are hitting each other. If no one intervenes, likely one will kill the other. Again, without authorization, Moses attempts to intervene. But this time, at least, he makes an attempt to investigate by questioning the one who delivered the first blow ("offender" is *rasha'*, meaning "the wicked one," suggesting that Moses may have already passed judgment). Houtman comments, "Evidently it is beyond him how people who have to endure the brutality of the Egyptians can also treat each other brutally."² Moses is not prepared for what happens next. Instead of being appreciated and welcomed as an advocate for the oppressed, he is placed on the witness stand and accused of a greater crime. The first question speaks to the issue of authority, and presents the two former enemies as a united front. The words "Who made you, only a man, into a prince and a judge over us?"³ penetrate Moses so deeply the pain is still evident forty years later, when he answers God's call with that cry of inadequacy, "Who am I?" (3:11).

The man's second question stings even deeper. Does Moses intend to kill him like he did the Egyptian? He says that his crime against his brother is not as bad as Moses' act of murder. Dominated by a world of violence, he cannot imagine that Moses might be motivated by any motive other than the thrill of shedding blood. The possibility of justice doesn't even enter into his thinking. Houtman concludes, "He views Moses as a meddler who is looking for an opportunity to kill a fellow human being. In brief, Moses is met with deaf ears, all his people do is treat him hostilely."⁴

The accusations totally undo Moses. Utterly disarmed and exposed, he is filled with fear. The pain is made all the greater because his own people, for whom he had taken a stand, want neither his leadership nor his help. These two scenes may suggest that Moses will encounter less opposition exercising justice over the Egyptians (i.e. the ten plagues), than his own people, the Hebrews (as seen in the wilderness).

The issue of authority was critical for Jesus when he was asked to arbitrate between two Hebrew brothers disputing over their father's inheritance. His response seems taken almost verbatim from our text: "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:14). Then, after putting the pointed question to them, he renders judgment, but it is much more penetrating than either brother had probably hoped for: "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

We come now to Moses' third attempt to exercise justice.

III. Social Justice Accepted In Midian (Exod 2:15-23)

A. Moses' encounter with women by the well (2:15-17)

When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill

Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. (2:15)

Now that Moses' crime has made the pages of the royal press, finding no safe refuge in Egypt, he is forced to flee, traveling due east to Midian. The Midianites, a group of nomadic tribes, "ranged over a very wide area of the Near East stretching from the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, up through the Syro-Arabian Desert, and into the border areas of the land of Israel, west and northwest of Elath."⁵ (Midianite traders had transported Joseph to Egypt.) Moses retraces the journey in reverse. As he walked through that terrible wilderness, did he feel that he was, in a sense, walking backwards in time, undoing the salvation history accomplished by Joseph? In Midian at last, safe from Pharaoh's reach, he seeks refuge by a well. Were his thoughts dominated by the guilt of twin failures, coupled with the loss of family and homeland? All his dreams of forty years, everything he had worked for, had gone up in smoke in two days. His royalty, education and priestly heritage count for nothing in a foreign land. He is reduced to a homeless orphan, totally dependent on the hospitality of foreigners to sustain him. He is a broken man.

At the point of our extreme brokenness, life's fortunes often take a dramatic turn. This is the third occasion in scripture that a man travels to a foreign land and finds himself by a well, a common meeting place in the ancient Near East. Typically, the stranger encounters a beautiful maiden. She draws water for him, and then runs home to tell her father of her encounter. These events are followed with a meal and a betrothal scene. In the Old Testament, wells and weddings go together. (There will be seven of these "type-scenes"⁶ in the scriptures, culminating in Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well in John 4.) The narrator does not disappoint us.

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. (2:16-17)

Moses has just happened upon the "right" well, and with it the terror of flight turns into a peaceful pastoral scene. He meets an influential family in Midian, a priest who had not just one or two daughters, like Laban, but seven. Moses continues to be surrounded by women, suggesting that women will continue to impact his life.

The daughters have come to draw water for their father's flock. But after they have filled the troughs, wicked shepherds try to profit from their labor by seizing the water for their own flocks. Moses is filled with righteous anger. Once again he takes the side of the oppressed, but this time his actions are more controlled. Instead of killing the oppressors, he rises up and "saves" the young girls. But he does not stop there; he graciously contributes to their lives by watering their flock for them. Moses proves himself a savior, a gentleman, and a life giver. Here he lives up to his calling as a "shepherd-deliverer." His display of strength by the well appears comparable to Jacob's removing of the massive stone (Gen 29:10). What joy and surprise his actions gave these daughters, and how they must have rehearsed his brave deed all the way home. This "macho" Egyptian was a dream catch for any young girl.

B. Moses' invitation home (2:18-20)

When they came to Reuel their father, he said, "Why have you come back so soon today?" So they said, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat." (2:18-20)

Reuel means "friend of God," and this father proves true to his name. There is some confusion whether Reuel is the father or grandfather of the girls. Later he is identified as Jethro, which Sarna suggests might be "his official priestly title, not a personal name. In fact, the word might mean 'His excellency.'" He will be a key player in the life of Moses. Through his hospitality, Moses will finally find a family and a home.

Reuel is surprised that his daughters have returned home so early. The shepherds' abuse was probably typical at this well, which made the already lengthy task of watering the flock even more arduous. The daughters cannot wait to express their consummate joy for the day's miracle: "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock." The divine irony in this statement is that God will turn this Egyptian into a shepherd. As such he will deliver a people of shepherds from the hands of the Egyptians, and draw water for them in the wilderness. The irony is even more profound when we consider that it is foreigners who first recognize Moses' destiny, and pay tribute to the "justice" he brings.

Yet the scene is not without its humor. "Where is the man?" Reuel demands. Once again, Moses is "abandoned," left alone, with no reward for his good deed. The one who might well have expected a lodging place, or at least a meal, finds himself alone at the well, surrounded by a group of angry shepherds. Strike three! But Reuel rebukes his daughters and orders them to return immediately and invite the Egyptian home for dinner.

Hospitality was one of the highest values of the Ancient Near East. Strangers traveling through foreign territory were treated like royalty in the tents of Bedouin tribes. Failure to extend hospitality was the height of wrongdoing (Deut 23:4), while its faithful exercise brought unexpected blessings (Heb 13:2). So Moses is finally rewarded for his "justice" and treated with generous hospitality; while Reuel, the pagan priest, proves to be a much more gracious host than Jacob's devious father-in-law Laban. Did this common theme train our Lord to expect a better reception among the Gentile world than among his own people? It is not without import that the first witness to proclaim the glory of the cross was not a Jew, but a Roman soldier (Mark 15:39).

C. Moses' new family (2:21-22)

Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. Then she gave birth to a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land." (2:21-22)

The hospitality afforded by a foreigner frees Moses to put his roots down in a place he can finally call home. Reuel adds even more kindness, adopting him as his son with the gift of his daughter, Zipporah. Unlike the stories of Isaac and Jacob, there is no mention of romantic love

consuming the patriarch. The silence suggests that the narrator is much more interested in Moses' future role as deliverer of the nation than he is in his marriage. Zipporah gives birth to a son. The Creator God brings life to Moses in a foreign land. The homeless fugitive now has a father, a wife and a son.

The name that Moses gives his son is revealing. Gershom⁸ means "a stranger there." It is an indication that, even though Moses was adopted by Reuel as a son-in-law, he never forgot his true identity or sense of destiny. Moses considered himself a *ger*, a Hebrew term for a free person living in a foreign land. He did not have the rights of a true citizen, and was therefore dependent on the hospitality and graciousness of others for his survival. A *ger* lived at constant risk of poverty, and was an easy prey for injustice. Ironically, the name "Gershom" will characterize the whole of Moses' life. Abandoned as youth in Egypt, raised in a foreign court, forced to flee his people for the wilderness of Midian, after forty more years of wandering endlessly in the wilderness, he only gets a distant view of the land of his longings shortly before his death.

Is there a lesson here? Is there something about the ache of alienation and homelessness that shapes God's servant to be a better instrument for divine justice? Did the pain of homelessness and the ache for family tenderize Israel's future liberator with a heart of compassion? Observe the growth in Moses' character in these three scenes. His passion for the oppressed remains the same, but his execution is tempered and refocused. In the first scene he is impetuous, impetuous and vengeful. There is no inquiry or due process, and a perverse delight in execution. But by the time he gets to Midian, his brave actions focus more on securing life than raw punishment. He not only risks his life to drive off the oppressors, he becomes a caring life-giver who waters the flocks of strangers. As the text concludes, Moses proclaims through his son's name that he has not only identified with the marginal and the disenfranchised, he has actually become one. The author of Hebrews says that this journey into homelessness was a tribute to Moses' faith:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen (Heb 11:24-27).

Moses' initial failures did not disqualify him for future service, for as Paul states, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). No, they did not disqualify him, but led him on a journey to homelessness that made him even more qualified for the task. When you become an orphan, and are forced to depend on the kindness of others to survive, God fills you with a divine compassion that removes the self-righteous edge from the exercise of justice. If Moses was to be God's right hand man for justice on earth, then there was not to be one ounce of self-righteous glee over the death of the wicked. As God himself says, "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord God. "Therefore, repent and live" (Ezek 18:32, cf. 1 Tim 2:3-4). For this reason we find God delaying his justice again and again to lead sinners to

repentance. And if his kindness is ultimately refused, heaven is filled with wailing and tears, not smug delight over the death of the wicked. Throughout the New Testament we are exhorted, as the Lord's bondservants, to be governed by gentleness, compassion and sorrow in every implementation of justice.

Moses' journey into exile and homelessness was as critical for his resume as his early education in Egypt. And this path would be followed by our Lord, who became intimately acquainted with exile. In fact, he took exile further than our minds can comprehend (Ps 22:1; Mark 15:34). And even then, when this gift of forgiveness was refused, Jesus did not gloat over the destruction of Jerusalem; he wept over the city as he contemplated its impending doom. Exile, then, is not disqualification, as you might think. It is a well-worn path for the saints, and one that the author of Hebrews commends as the only "way home."

So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come. (Heb 13:13-14)

1. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (Schocken: New York, 1986), 33.
2. Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1 HCOT* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 293.
3. Translation of John Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 19.
4. Houtman, *Exodus*, 294.
5. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 35.
6. Called "type-scenes" by Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 47-62.
7. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 36.
8. The verbal stem *garash* was also used to describe the actions of the wicked shepherds who "drove off" Reuel's daughters at the well.

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