

24 August 2014

Foundations: Servant of God

Leviticus - Deuteronomy

For eight weeks we have explored the foundations of our faith, as I've retold the stories of the Torah. We've had the stories of creation and the flood, of Abraham and Jacob and Joseph. We've heard how God called Moses as his servant, then brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and made covenant with them. In these stories, we have met a God with a distinct personality: a God who creates just out of the joy of creating, a God who desires relationship, who makes promises and keeps them, who hears the cry of the afflicted, who is eager to be asked for forgiveness, who raises the head of the weak and brings the mighty to their knees.

Covenant was where we left off last week. At Mt. Sinai, God promised that he would be Israel's God, and they would be his people. He would never leave them, and they were to keep his commands. Then Moses went up the mountain to receive those commands, literally set in stone. Well, after receiving the law the Israelites remained at Sinai for a while getting organized as a new people. Two gifted artists named Bezalel and Oholiab made a portable shrine to the Lord, the Tabernacle, along with its furniture – such as the Ark of the Covenant, a sacred box in which to keep the tablets of the law. Then God designated one of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Levi, to take charge of the Tabernacle and to serve as priests for the nation. At last, all was ready, and the people set off. The Levites carried the ark carried before the people, following the pillar of cloud by which God led them. Never has there been so grand a procession of followers of God –the covenant people set off for the Promised Land, filled with all the faith and gratitude that they had always shown.

“Manna again? I'm tired of manna. Maybe, for a change, God could drop off a little good pumpernickel, you think? Would it hurt God to at least leave us some decent butter once? And I'm thirsty.”

“God?” Moses said. “I'm not entirely sure how you put up with this people, but they're about to get on my last nerve.”

“Well,” said God, “maybe you shouldn't deal with them all by yourself. Gather seventy elders from the tribes of Israel, solid dependable leaders, all of them.”

So Moses went through the tribes and found seventy men who were already looked to as leaders within their clans, and he brought them before the Tabernacle. There, God appeared in the cloud and blessed the seventy. In the words of Numbers 11, God took some of the spirit that he had laid on Moses and put it on the elders, so that they could bear the burden of the people along with him. Actually, it turned out that God was more generous with his spirit than even Moses thought. In fact, more generous than some thought was appropriate. After God had blessed those seventy, there appeared in the camp two other men, who had *not* been selected by Moses, who showed all the signs of God's spirit. This distressed Moses' assistant, young Joshua.

“Moses, there are two men – Eldad and Medad – who were not blessed by you at the Tent of Meeting, and they're prophesying in the name of the Lord! They have to be stopped! Shall I get my sword?”

Moses just looked at him. “Joshua, who are you trying to protect? God? Me? Are you worried about my position? Don't. I wish all God's people were prophets. *That* would be cool.”

Now I've mentioned in passing that Moses had a Midianite wife named Zipporah. But now – and I bet this is one story you missed in Sunday School – it turns out that somewhere along the line he had taken a second wife, an African woman from Ethiopia. Now, for some reason, this irked Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was ethnic – they thought he should marry a good Jewish girl. Maybe it was racial. Maybe it was personal. But whatever it was they didn't want that African woman in the family, so they sniped at their brother to the people. "I don't see what's so special about Moses," they said. "We're prophets, too, you know. God has spoken to us as well." So the Lord called the three siblings to the Tent of Meeting, where he spoke directly to Miriam and Aaron: "Listen to me. As you say, I am the one who speaks through the prophets, and yes, that includes you. But know this: I have never spoken to a prophet as I speak to my servant Moses. Be careful, you two." And when the cloud of God's presence left the Tabernacle, Miriam found that she was a leper. I don't know why it was just Miriam, but I'm going to guess that Aaron turned pretty pale, too.

"God?" Moses called, "Cut it out, will you? Thank you for your vote of support, and all that, but come on! Heal her now! Please." And God healed her. No one had ever spoken to God as Moses did, either.

God was less patient with the people a few weeks later. Israel made their way through the desert to the verge of Promised Land, and God told Moses to select one man from each of the twelve tribes to go into Canaan as scouts, to bring back to the nation a description of the bounty that God was giving to them. I won't bother giving you all twelve names, but two of them matter. From the tribe of Ephraim was Joshua, whom we've already met, and from the tribe of Judah was a young man named Caleb.

The scouts crossed the desert into the land of Canaan and found it just as promised. There were olive groves, vineyards, pasture land for cattle and sheep, fields for grain and barley. It was a good land, but it was not just sitting there empty, waiting for settlers. The scouts returned to the people of Israel in the wilderness. "We can't do this!" they said, or at any rate, most of them said. "Sure, it's a great land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but there are people there! People living in huge cities with high stone walls! And some of those people are huge themselves – giants! We felt like grasshoppers in their presence! We're doomed!"

And the people lifted their voices in despair, "See? This is just what we said all along! God just brought us out here to kill us!"

But two of the scouts – Caleb and Joshua – said, "What are you so afraid of? Remember what God has already done for us? He brought us out of Egypt. He's fed us. He's given us water. Sure, there are some big people there, but God goes with us. Come on, let's move in now!"

Sometimes we get used to living in the desert. It's hard, but after a while it becomes, you know, familiar. We say we want to leave, but if doing so feels dangerous . . . well, some people will choose the dreary misery they know over the scary prospect of change. That's what Israel did; they chose not to go to the Promised Land, but rather to stay in the desert. Moses had a lot to say to God that day. He stomped and yelled and threw up his hands and suggested that maybe God should blast them, just once or twice, little blasts. But one of things you might have noticed as we have worked our way through these stories is that God lets people make bad choices. When Moses was done, God said, "They have chosen the desert; they can have the desert. I'll still feed them and take care of them. And when this generation has all died, and their children have grown up, *then* I'll take them into the land. They can't stop me from keeping my promises; but they *can* choose when, and whether they want to be a part of them."

So, the people of Israel stayed in the desert another thirty-nine years. Moses didn't like it. I'm going to guess that Joshua and Caleb didn't like it. But that's what they did. Miriam died. Aaron died. Well, pretty much everyone who came out of Egypt died. During those years, some people rebelled against Moses' leadership. They died, too – a little faster than the others. The people continued living on manna and quails. They continued complaining periodically about not having water, and God continued giving it to them. I need to mention one of those times. It was at a place called Massah, and the people were thirsty. God told Moses, "It's all right. Go and speak to that rock, and there will be water."

But this day Moses was maybe a little tired, because he decided to do it his way. Drawing himself up before the rock, he gave the people a lecture on their lack of faith in him, then smashed the rock with his staff. God made water flow from the rock – the people *were* thirsty, after all – but then God took Moses aside. "Now why did you have to do that, Moses? You sort of made it all about you, didn't you? And then you didn't do what I said. Remember, I'm letting a whole generation die in the desert without coming to the Promised Land because they wouldn't do what I said. You think you're exempt from that expectation?"

Moses swallowed. "Will I be allowed to enter the Promised Land, Lord?"

"I'll show it to you, my friend. But Joshua and Caleb will take them in."

At last, no one was left from the generation that had refused to enter Canaan except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. The people began to move again toward their destination. Now, there was one more obstacle. Before they could get to the land itself, they would have to pass through some other nations – but none of those nations would let that band of refugees through. In fact, two of them sent armies against them, led by King Sihon, of Heshbon, and King Og, of Bashan. One of the psalms that remembers the Exodus, Psalm 135, summarizes the story like this:

*It was God who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
both human beings and animals;
he sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt
against Pharaoh and all his servants
He struck down mighty nations and killed mighty kings –
Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan
and all the kingdoms of Canaan (vv. 8-11)*

So, as it turned out, Israel began their conquest of Canaan a little early, by conquering the lands of Sihon and Og, east of the Jordan River. Then they came to the nation of Moab, which brings us to a curious story that is tucked away in the book of Numbers. There was a famous prophet in Moab named Balaam. There really was; archeologists have actually found Moabite inscriptions that mention Balaam the prophet. The king of Moab, when he heard what the Hebrews had done to Sihon and Og, sent for this Balaam. He knew that Balaam had great power, and he wanted that power turned against Israel. He wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites. But it seems that even though Balaam was not of the people of Abraham, he was still a prophet of the one God, who told him to leave the Israelites alone. So Balaam refused the king's request, but the king of Moab kept raising his fee, until Balaam agreed and started for the court. So, God sent an angel with a sword to stand by the path and stop him. Balaam was blind to the danger he was in, but, evidently, the donkey he rode was more perceptive than he was. The donkey saw the angel ahead, and sat down, refusing to move. Balaam beat the donkey in his impatience. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, who said, "Hey! Stop that! Have I ever done this to you before? Open your eyes, man!" Then Balaam saw the angel waiting with the sword. Balaam fell on his face before the angel, who said, "Leave the donkey alone, blockhead. He just saved your life."

“Sorry? Want me go home?”

“No,” said the angel. “You’ve come this far, you might as well go on. But make sure you only say what God tells you to say.”

So Balaam went on to the king of Moab, who took him up on a mountain from which he could see the camps of Israel. “There they are. Curse them in the name of the gods.”

And Balaam opened his mouth and blessed the nation of Israel in the name of the Lord. Three times.

When we were working through Genesis, I paused during the story of Abraham to draw attention to the odd figure of Melchizedek, king of Salem. Melchizedek was not one of the chosen people – but he is nevertheless described as a true priest and servant of Abraham’s god. Well, I want to pause in the same way now. Israel had become God’s special possession, but that only worked one way. God was not their special possession. God continued then, and continues today, to go wherever God chooses and to speak through anyone. Even prophets and priests of other lands, even foreigners. Even jackasses. And thank God for that.

So the people of Israel came at last to the edge of the land that God had promised Abraham centuries ago. Moses called the people together and in a series of long speeches, reminded them of all that God had done for them, and all that they had promised to do for God. Those speeches make up the last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. In that book, Israel reaffirmed the covenant that God had made with their parents on Mt. Sinai.

Then Moses went alone up a mountain there, Mt. Nebo. His story and his time were drawing to a close. Our summer spent with the foundations of our faith is ending as well, but I can’t tell that ending in my own words. Deuteronomy, chapter 34, does it more simply and eloquently than I ever could.

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

In one of those speeches in Deuteronomy, Moses simply retells the story of the Exodus. After all, he was speaking to the generation that had been born in the wilderness, who hadn’t been there. But when he is done, he says to them, “And now this is your story.” That’s why I spend summers like this, just telling the stories that constitute our faith. Because now the story is yours. The God who hears the cry of the oppressed, who makes covenant, who forgives, and who leads us home – this God is your God. Amen