

June 11-12, 2011

Great People in God's Story Series

Title: *Moses...Followers Become Leaders*

Theme: *Moses is one of the first great leaders to emerge in the story of God. Moses expertly delegated authority and it was his hope that all of God's people would be prophets and that God's spirit would be active in and through all people. The Spirit of God is active in us working through us. Moses was right.*

Text: Numbers 11:24-30

Note: When this text comes up in the lectionary it often includes these verses: 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29. I will write this sermon nugget from the perspective of us reading all the above verses.

Notes on the Text

Few people have impacted the Judeo-Christian faith more than Moses. His story is rich, in places raw, and his finger-prints can be found well beyond the boundaries of the Hebrew Scriptures and into the Christian Scriptures.

From the beginning of Moses' story we learn that he was a "fine" baby (Ex. 2:2). Why is that significant? Because the exact same Hebrew word that God uses to describe creation (translated "good") Moses is "good" in the same way. The author connects the birth of Moses with God's continuing creative movement, letting us know just how special this baby is.

It's interesting (and to some disturbing) to note the remarkable parallels between the story of Moses' birth and other ancient stories of the birth of extraordinary children. In fact, the motif is so frequent in ancient literature it even has a name, the "exposed child" motif. For instance, the legend of King Sargon of Mesopotamia follows a strikingly similar pattern. Listen to a portion of Sargon's purported autobiography:

"My mother was a high priestess, my father I knew not. The brothers of my father loved the hills. My city is Azupiranu, which is situated on the banks of the Euphrates. My high priestess mother conceived me, in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose over me. The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me."

Like so many of the "heroes" of the bible Moses has a "dark" past. He is a murderer (Ex. 2:11ff). He also fails along the way, but that only allows God to receive all the glory for what is accomplished through Moses' leadership. And like many other leaders (eg. Jesus) Moses spends time in the wilderness being prepared for his public ministry." In fact, that is just one of the many parallels between Moses and Jesus. Moses is a type of Christ for the Israelites...and Moses later became a lens through which the Jews came to understand who Jesus is. Consider the parallels between Moses' life and Jesus':

- Both were born Hebrews
- At the time of their birth powerful rulers called for the death of all male born Hebrews
- Both were threatened as infants and had to be hidden to be saved
- Moses spent 40 years as a shepherd being prepared for his leadership. Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the desert preparing for his leadership.
- Moses met God on a mountain. Jesus was God on a mountain.
- Both performed miracles
- Both were considered great prophets
- Moses interceded for God to miraculously feed his people. Jesus miraculously fed people.
- Moses was a lawgiver...the 10 commandments. Jesus was a lawgiver...love God and love neighbor.
- Moses prayed for his people. Jesus prays for all people.
- Both set God's people free.

Finally, the Jews expected that one day God would send his people a prophet like Moses to save them. Jesus was that prophet.

Today's text is a classic interaction between Moses, the people and God. It is also rich in lessons about leadership and followership!

The people are tired of the food God has provided in the wilderness and long for the Egyptian Buffet they left behind (seems they forgot about all the hard labor that made them so hungry!). This whining is a repeated theme in Exodus and Numbers, meant to show the obstinacy of the people. And Moses' response is classic. He just passes the complaining on to God, assuming that God expects Moses to make it all right. Moses' response shows that he, too, does not trust the One who broke the back of Egypt with a mighty hand. Moses look outward and inward, rather than upward...a dangerous leadership response indeed.

In contrast, God's response is both remarkable and gracious. Rather than harshly disciplining the people (which God did for similar complaints in other passages) or chiding Moses for his thumb-sucking response, God not only provides meat for the people (that is not a part of our reading) but more importantly provides Moses with additional leaders to share the leadership burden (in fact Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, had told Moses to do something like this back in Exodus 18).

God shares the empowering Spirit which he had placed on Moses with seventy elders who will bear the burden of leadership along with Moses. These elders prophesy, a sign of divine anointing...but only once! While these elders are empowered to lead Moses remains "top dog" in Israel, the one who will continue to speak face-to-face with God and bring God's Word to the people.

The "vignette" about Eldad and Medad (vv. 26-30) is both curious and insightful. Joshua, who will become Moses' successor as the people move into the Promised

Land, is jealous for Moses' sake. He seeks to protect Moses' authority in the same way that John the Baptist (John 3:26-30) and Jesus (Luke 9:46-50) did. In this case Moses shows leadership maturity by not being jealous himself, not needing to "protect his turf". Moses is a learning leader!

Preaching Possibilities

As will be the case with most of the sermons in this series I'll spend time simply telling Moses story, then focusing on this particular text, then sharing some insights or lessons for our own faith life. Perhaps the most challenging part of the sermon will be picking and choosing which parts of Moses' story to tell. Unlike many of the people we'll be exploring throughout this series we know a great deal about Moses' story from birth to death.

I'm tempted to focus the "insights" part of this message on the text at hand, especially since we at Prince of Peace have a need for more leaders to be engaged with God's work. From that perspective we have a "Moses" mentality in many ways, assuming that the pastors and staff are responsible for the work. But as this text shows many more are called to lead and all are called to be engaged in ministry rather than complaining. Here are a few "Leadership Lessons" to consider:

- God calls and equips those who are called to lead. And God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things. This is a lesson we've learned over and over again in this series...and it bears repeating until people not only get it but see themselves in it!
- Great leaders learn from failure. Just because you've failed doesn't mean you're disqualified.
- You never know what God is preparing you for next. I'm sure Moses never dreamed that being a shepherd would prepare him to lead people through the wilderness.
- Leadership is hard work. The leadership principle of the whale says it best, "Those who rise to the top get harpooned."
- Leaders need both support (co-leaders) and followers. There's a leadership proverb that says, "If you think you're leading, but no one is following, you're merely taking a walk." Leadership is an earned commodity.
- Leaders take every problem to God in prayer...even if that prayer starts with whining!
- Others??