



Summer Preaching Series:
Characters of the Bible

Moses



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

June 24, 2018
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Today, we continue our summer preaching series: *Characters of the Bible*, by looking at the life of Moses, one of the most important figures, if not the most important figure, of the Old Testament. Many of you are probably familiar with Moses, if not from the Bible itself, then perhaps from the ways in which he's been depicted through art and culture. In the movies alone, Moses has been portrayed by Charlton Heston and Mel Brooks, and he has been the subject of a full length Disney animated film. All of this is because Moses was revered as a leader known for his patience, steadfastness and faith. Moses guided the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt and led them to land of promise; he performed signs and wonders that revealed the power and glory of God; and he was one of the very few human beings who knew the Lord face to face.

Moses was born several thousand years before Jesus, at a time when the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. Despite their captivity, the people of Israel flourished, their population growing and growing, until they vastly outnumbered the Egyptians. This made the Egyptian pharaoh nervous, and, acting out of fear, pharaoh ordered all the newborn Israelite males to be killed. Not wanting to lose her new baby boy, Moses' mother placed little Moses in a papyrus basket and strategically set the basket in the Nile River, at a spot where pharaoh's daughter often bathed. When the pharaoh's daughter saw the baby lying there all alone in the basket, she took pity on the baby and decided to raise him as her own, and so Moses grew up in comfort and security.

But when he reached young adulthood, Moses went out to the Israelites one day and saw their forced labor. He watched as an Egyptian beat an Israelite slave, and angered at what was happening to his people, Moses killed that Egyptian, hiding his body in the sand. Afraid word might get out, and in particular, might get back to pharaoh, Moses fled Egypt and settled in the land of Midian, where he met a kindly priest named, Jethro. Jethro welcomed Moses into his family, allowing Moses to marry one of his daughters, and he gave Moses a job, tending to his flock. And, for a long time, Moses felt safe, happy and at home.

Then, one day, Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, and he led the flock beyond the wilderness until he reached Mount Horeb, the mountain of God; and there, God appeared to Moses out of a burning bush. God wanted Moses return to Egypt and lead the people of Israel out of slavery, because God had heard the misery of the Israelites, and God remembered his promise to them -- his promise to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob -- and God wanted to set the Israelites free.

But Moses wasn't so sure. He was skeptical and afraid. He didn't like what God was saying. Moses didn't want to go back to Egypt, and he didn't want to confront pharaoh. Life in Midian was going so well, with everything falling into place. What if he went back and people didn't believe him? What if he couldn't articulate what God wanted him to say? Moses had always been a little slow of speech, a little slow of tongue, so there was no way he could deal with what God was asking him to do. It just wouldn't work. It all felt like it was too much, too daunting, too overwhelming for Moses. Why did God have to put this on him now?

It was one of those moments in life when the future seems cloudy and uncertain, when there are more questions than answers, more doubt than confidence. And those moments can be challenging and difficult, no matter who you are, because we all want to have control over our lives. We all want to know how things will turn out. We all want to know that things will be alright. And when we can't know, when we can't see the future, when we can't see the path ahead, it's hard. It's really hard.

People often say: “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” You’ve probably heard that phrase before. Someone might have said it to you at one point, or maybe you said it to someone else. It’s an expression that’s always offered with the best of intentions. People are just trying to be helpful and supportive. When someone we know is having a hard time, we feel compelled to do something, or say something to lift them up, and “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle” does seem to offer hope. The words are a loose translation from Scripture¹, and what better way is there to give someone hope and confidence than to quote directly from the Bible?

But I don’t know. I don’t know if those words are always helpful and comforting. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me,” but sometimes the cross we have to bear is just too heavy, too much for us to carry. Imagine saying, “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle,” to someone who recently lost their job, or someone who was newly diagnosed with cancer. Or, imagine saying those words to the victim of abuse, whether it was physical or verbal. Sometimes, those words just don’t seem right. They don’t ring true, because there are moments in life when it seems like God *does* give us more than we can handle.

Sheryl Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, and back in 2015, she experienced one of those moments when she lost her husband unexpectedly. Reflecting on what had happened, Sandberg writes:

*And so, began the rest of my life. It was – and still is – a life I never would have chosen, a life I was completely unprepared for. The unimaginable... I was in “the void.”*²

Back on mount Horeb, Moses was in a similar kind of void, facing a life he never would have chosen, a life he was completely unprepared for, and amid all of his protesting and arguing with God, we hear him say essentially that: “There’s no way I can do this. I’m not strong enough. I’m not brave enough. I can’t go back. I can’t confront pharaoh. I just can’t. God, you’re giving me more than I can handle all by myself.”

And yet, God doesn’t relent. God hears what Moses is saying. God hears the complaints, the protests, the arguments, but God’s basic reply is: “Who said you would be all alone? I will be with you, and Aaron and Miriam will be with you. We’re all in this together. So, you’ll never be alone.”

The Bible says: *God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing, God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*³

That is the actual translation of the Bible verse. *God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing, God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*⁴

And, that is true. God will provide. God does provide. God provides us with family and friends, people who love us and care for us, and we have a church community, people who are willing to step up and help, when we need it. Most of all, we have God. God is always nearby. God knows our pain and knows our struggles, and God will never leave us alone. We’re never, ever alone. We’re all in this together.

Amen.

¹Corinthians 1

²Sandberg, *Option B*.

³1 Corinthians 10:13

⁴1 Corinthians 10:13