

## The Prophets 1: Lessons from Moses

Exodus 3: 1-14

July 7, 2019

One of the recent covers of the New Yorker Magazine featured an image of a couple getting ready to go to sleep. They are in bed, heads on their pillows with their eyes nervously looking on either side of them, because on each of their nightstands are towers of books, you can tell they hope to read someday, and they are worried these books will topple and fall on them.

My nightstand is like that, maybe yours is too. A couple of years ago, I purchased a book on the Biblical Prophets by a I admire, Ellen Davis, a Bible prof at Duke Theological Seminary. I've been wanting to get to it, knowing it will be helpful and July is the month. Pastor Lauren and I will be preaching through a series on the Biblical prophets and Ellen Davis' work will be a primary thought partner.

Davis says that "in word and deed, the prophets interpreted the faith for their time, and equally, they interpreted the times for the faithful." A question for us is, "can the prophets help us interpret this time?" (Someone help us interpret this time?) She also says "that the Bible in both Testaments is prophetically shaped, first and last." To me that means that if we understand some central concerns of the prophets, we are on our way to understanding the Bible as a whole. Perhaps we can get some answers to, "who are we to be, in these times, as people of faith, as the body of Christ, the church.

This week our focus is on the story of Moses. The story of Moses and the people of Israel is a story of liberation **and migration** (something important in our time). This story is the foundational story of the Bible, but this experience of liberation and migration, I think, leads to the foundation of the ethic of the Bible: neighborliness. (The Great Commandment is Love God, Love Neighbor, if you know that you know all the law and the prophets, Jesus says.)

The Book of Exodus begins in chapter 1 by telling us that the Israelites are being oppressed in Egypt. In chapter 2 we meet Moses. Right away we see that Moses is able to identify with those who are suffering. Moses has empathy for the people like God has empathy for the people. Moses “sees” the forced labor of the Hebrews in the same way that chapter 3 will say that God “sees” this oppression of the Hebrew slaves and hears their cries. This empathy for those who are suffering and facing injustice is central to the prophets and central to the Bible.

Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and Moses waits to see if anyone is going to do justice. No one responds and so he responds with violence by killing the Egyptian. Pharaoh hears about it, Moses is afraid, and he flees to Midian. There he defends the Priest’s daughters who are being harassed by some shepherds. Again, he defends the defenseless. He marries one of the daughters and settles into life as a shepherd.

In our passage for today, Moses is lost, he’s wandering. The wilderness is the Bible’s word for wandering and aimlessness. Moses is so thoroughly without direction that he isn’t just in the wilderness, he’s beyond it. He stumbles upon Mt. Horeb, the Mountain of God, and God

appears to Moses through an angel. Moses isn't looking for God in his aimlessness, but God comes to meet us in our aimlessness and sometimes gives us more than we are bargaining for.

God calls to Moses through the burning bush and says, "I've observed the misery of my people, I've heard their cry, I know their sufferings, I have come to deliver them from Egypt and to bring them to a good land. So I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt."

Moses, famously, says, "Huh, whatever." "I'm not gonna do that."

I've always liked this story. I like this resistance of Moses because it's so true. The resistance of Moses goes on for a while, 27 verses, just under 1/3 of the Book of Exodus to this point. God, like any parent on a road trip, is patient for a while, and then God, like most parents on a road trip, loses it, and gets angry with all of the questions, complaining and whining of Moses. Moses is not trying to problem solve, he's just trying to get out of this because he doesn't trust that God can do anything.

God will not be denied. Moses gives in and then he goes straight to Pharaoh. Moses goes to the center of all human power and corruption to say, "God says, "let my people go." The drama between God and Pharaoh begins, and God doesn't just win, God completely dismantles everything Pharaoh's empire needs to survive. There's deliverance through the Red Sea (liberation) travel through the wilderness for three moons to get to Mt. Sinai (the beginning of migration), there's the Ten Commandments and the instruction on Sinai, and then continued migration to the land of Canaan, the promised land.

Embedded in that instruction on Mt. Sinai, though, is this verse, Exodus 23:9: “You shall not subject the sojourner to pressure; you yourselves know the sojourner’s very life, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

Ellen Davis says that this verse may well be the urtext for an important aspect of the prophetic perspective. What’s an urtext? I asked that myself. I had to look that up. It is “an original or the earliest version of a text, to which later versions can be compared.” Here we may have the verse, that reflects the experience that starts it all for the prophets.

A central characteristic of the prophets, is an ability to, and a reminder to, identify with people who are different than you. The prophets remembered and pointed out the connection between Israelites and non-Israelites. It’s a move outward towards neighborliness. “Remember you were a sojourner too. Come on! That was you.” We see this neighborliness as the fundamental ethic in the stories of Jesus as he reminds the church of the connection between Jew and Gentile, the healthy and the sick, men and women, friend and enemy. This impulse towards neighborliness, empathy, seeing yourself in another, the central ethic of our faith is connected to, is rooted in, the Exodus story and the experience of migration.

The Hebrew scriptures return to this verse again and again. It’s a refrain of the Bible, “remember the sojourner, for you were once a sojourner in the land of Egypt.” This is likely repeated again and again because the pages of the Bible spring from a time when migration was happening, and people were being human, responding to migrants with fear rather than compassion. In the same way that my New Testament professor would explain the passages in

the New Testament that tell women to be silent by saying, “you don’t tell women to be silent in church unless they are speaking,” it is probably true that you don’t have to repeat, “treat the sojourner in the land with compassion,” unless they are being heartless in their treatment of the stranger.

Moses and the Prophets and the Bible are wrestling with this fundamental human challenge that we are wrestling with today, “what do we do with the stranger in our land, in our community, in our neighborhood? Shouldn’t I act out of fear, protecting what I have? How can there be enough for me and for them? Shouldn’t I drive them away?” And the prophets say “No!” again and again and again. Respond with empathy. Respond with compassion. Respond with generosity as God has been compassionate and generous towards you. Remember your own story of liberation and migration. Remember who you are, and you will know what to do and how to act.

We are heartbroken by the stories of what is happening to children and families at the border. We are ashamed at the response of our leaders: fear and disdain expressed for those who are poor, different, and brown as they come to our country for survival. We are angered by the threats of removal and actual removal of people who have been in our community for decades.

Moses and the prophets come from a time when the leaders were also acting out of fear. They remind the people again and again that we are to be a people who act differently in the midst of this fear. We are to be a people who remember our stories, who remember the

compassion and generosity we have received, who remember our faith stories and our family stories, and then lead with neighborliness.

As the national immigration conversation has been spinning out of control, I've been thinking about and telling my own family story.

The Lippert side of my family grew up in a small German settlement in southeast South Dakota. My dad is the youngest of four children, and when his oldest brother LeRoy was a young child, my great grandmother Vellmo lived in the house. She didn't speak English. She didn't like it when her daughter and her husband, my grandparents, spoke English, because she thought they were talking about them. So they only spoke German in the house.

This meant my Uncle LeRoy went to school not knowing any English. My uncle LeRoy went on to graduate from High School. He was the first Lippert to go to college. He was a math teacher, a farmer, and the longtime mayor of Danville, IA. In many ways, he lived the American dream. He lived the story that so many new Americans (Mexican, Somali) all around us are living right now. I'm only one generation removed from that experience. How many of us are only one or two generations removed from that experience?

"You shall not subject the sojourner to pressure; you yourselves know the sojourner's very life, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

As the church, as people who carry the story and teachings of Moses, we are to be a people who move first towards neighborliness whether we are talking about immigrants, new people in the neighborhood, new family members, people breaking into our friend group, those

who are different, those who are sick, any who are powerless, even our enemies. We are to be a people who stay clear on this value that starts with a burning bush and a reluctant response that leads to liberation and migration. We are to be a people who stay clear on this value even when others are responding with fear. We are to be a people who remember our story and then live out of generosity and compassion, because we have received generosity and compassion. One lesson from Moses. Amen.