

Straw Men and Women

Exodus 5:1-9

Sometimes a preacher does not know what to preach. Sometimes events make it overwhelmingly clear what to preach. This is one of those times. I wrote these words on Friday afternoon. Events by now may very well have developed in unexpected and dramatic ways. But as of this writing, the Egyptian government has kept their border closed to Palestinians trying to flee the expected attack of Israeli forces responding to the sneak attack of Hamas on October 7. Moses would have known the spot. He may even have walked through the low pass between the hills of the Sinai Peninsula at Rafah.

Our passage from Exodus starts with the word, “Afterward.” After what? Bible scholars cannot come to a consensus on this question. Moses has killed an Egyptian overseer whom he has witnessed abusing a slave. He has fled for his life into the wilderness. He has encountered the burning bush, from which he perceived the Lord calling him to go back to Egypt and lead his people to freedom. Despite having every reason not to do it. He goes.

But what immediately preceded our verses? In Exodus 4:24 we read of the Lord seeking to kill Moses. No reason is given. Then we read of his wife, Zipporah, somehow placating the Lord by circumcising Moses, a grown man. And now is when

all the men hearing these words begin to squirm. Then the Lord, again without any supporting reason, instructs Aaron, Moses' brother, to go out into the wilderness to meet him. Then, though the text says nothing about their return to Egypt, we read of the two brothers addressing the Hebrews. The narrative follows no discernible, rational sequence. It gives no meaning, no coherence, no rationale. These seemingly random things happen and then, in Exodus 5, we suddenly find Moses and Aaron standing before the Pharaoh of Egypt. But then, why should anything that happens in the Middle East make sense to us?

Moses and Aaron tell Pharaoh to, "let my people go, that they may hold a feast to (the Lord) in the wilderness." This is a lie. They mean to get away, not to hold some rite out in the desert and then come back to Egypt. Pharaoh sees through the ruse. He says, "I do not know your Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go." The two brothers make a play for sympathy. "Let us go," they say, "a three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." Three days. That's all they ask. But as everybody participating in this conversation knows full well, a three days' journey makes for a terrific head start. Everybody knows the Hebrews would try to keep going.

Pharaoh has had enough. He orders the brothers to get their people back to work. And here we encounter another question scholars debate. What, exactly, was the Hebrews' work? At Orchard Park Presbyterian Church in Carmel, where I was baptized and attended as a boy, the original chapel still stands. Now surrounded by

newer buildings, it still has its stained glass windows, illuminated by spotlights. One depicts the Hebrew slaves building the Egyptian pyramids. They did not. The evidence point to the time of the Hebrews' Egyptian slavery as between 1350 and 1200 BCE. The “youngest” known pyramid was completed about a thousand years before then. *That* is how ancient the Egyptian civilization is.

All we know from the text of Exodus is that the Hebrews' work required that they make their own bricks to build whatever they were building. And they were enslaved. Pharaoh orders his “taskmasters” to maintain the full quota of bricks expected to be produced daily, while denying the Hebrews a ready supply of straw. I do not fully understand the technology, but I did spend a week in high school making bricks. Our church youth group from Bloomington journeyed to Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian conference center in the dry southern Rocky Mountains of New Mexico. State Department funding had made possible the experimental construction of four adobe houses. They had four separate heating and cooling systems, all of them using low or no amounts of electricity. Keep in mind the climate in northern New Mexico ranges from barely above zero in the winter to over 100 degrees in the summer. Yet it was posited that one or more of these designs might work well.

They all relied on adobe bricks. Our group joined local workers to build them. We did it substantially in the same way the ancient Hebrews would have done. We shoveled wheelbarrow loads of clay soil into hand-cranked mixers about the size of the trash tote you put at the end of your driveway. We added water and straw, little by

little, until we could stir the mixture into a thick paste. This we poured into rectangular wooden frames outlining about 24 bricks. Then we let the sun dry them. Finally, we would turn to frames that had been filled about a week before. We would tap them with hammers and lift the wood. The bricks stayed on the ground. These we hauled over to the construction site. Masons used them to build exterior walls about six feet thick. Along with ingenious ventilation systems those walls kept the heat and the cold at bay inside those homes. The most successful of the designs became a prototype for affordable housing in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Now imagine doing this work through the heat of the day in a desert climate. I do not recall exactly what time we started working that week on Ghost Ranch—it was 1975—but it was as the daylight first made it possible. So I would guess about 6:00am. We worked until lunch and then quit for the day. Working in the afternoon ran the risk of heat stroke or heat exhaustion. The Jews of Moses' day probably received no such consideration. The whole tenor of our passage suggests the Egyptians could not have cared less what happened to their slaves, so long as the bricks got made and the buildings got built. Pharaoh calculated that they could never find the added energy even to contemplate escape, let alone to accomplish it. All of which leads at long last to the point we wish to draw out of today's scripture. Moses kept going. He did not quit. After receiving his call from the Lord to lead his people to freedom he relentlessly pursued its fulfillment until it happened.

We have embarked on a sermon series on biblical models of leadership. Last

week we revisited Abram, who, when offered a pig in a poke by God, took it. The Lord urged him to go “to a land that I will show you.” And he went. As I said, he chose Door #3 when he had no idea what lay behind it. His form of leadership therefore becomes a model for all to go wherever God sends them. This has important implications in the church. Often times church leadership suspects they know where God wants to send the church. But that direction seems so frightful, too different, too fraught with change and loss, and the leaders fail to lead there.

Today we visit with Moses, who once called, did not stop pursuing that call until he achieved it. He had every reason not to go back to Egypt. He had killed a man and, though the Lord told him otherwise, had every reason to suspect his head still had a price on it. Plus, his people had no power. They were enslaved to Pharaoh, an incredibly powerful despot. What chance did Moses have of getting them released? Yet he went. And he kept going until they got out of Egypt. Church leadership that persists as he did can accomplish equally unlikely things. Twice I have served as a commissioner to the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s General Assembly. This national meeting takes place every two years. No important change in church policies can take place without two General Assembly's approvals. I first served as a commissioner in 1986; the second time was in 2008. In those twelve years many of the same issues were on the docket. Presbyterians do not make decisions quickly or easily. But while I do not agree with every decision we made at those meetings, I must say it was impressive and reassuring to watch them in action. As we like to say, there *is* wisdom in the body, be it a General Assembly or a local church's session.

To return to Moses and the Middle East, we appear to have entered a time of crisis not seen there since 1973 or 1966. A time that requires leadership. The hatreds there run deep and long. The Human Genome Project has determined that the Palestinians' DNA contains links to the ancient Canaanites, who lived in today's Israel before the Hebrews came, before Abraham arrived on the scene approximately 2,000 before Christ did. One writer calls the Palestinians the "Mutts of the Mideast". (Unfortunately I cannot find where I saw that.) They mix the genetic inheritance of the Canaanites with the Phoenicians, the Arabs and even the Jews. The Jews themselves have been in and out of the Promised Land for nearly as long—and their bloodlines are also quite mixed, with modern Israelis carrying Polish and Russian, Spanish and Moorish and many other sources of DNA.

Both sides are utterly convinced in their own right to occupy the land. Both are utterly convinced of the evil of other side. Neither will budge a millimeter. The situation calls for visionary, strong, relentless leadership. But we cannot choose their leaders. The Palestinians cannot even choose their own. All we can do is support those of our own leaders who exhibit the capacity truly to lead. To lead with biblical principles like Abraham's obedience to the will of the Lord and Moses' tenacity. And we can pray. As I urge all of us to do. Pray for peace. Peace that lasts longer than the fuse on a rocket propelled grenade, peace that has enough depth to withstand demagogues' efforts to stir up even more hatred. Please pray for leadership in the Middle East, in our nation, in this congregation. And together, let us keep going in whatever directions we believe God is impelling us.