

Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-15

The book of Exodus opens with the Hebrew descendants of Joseph becoming numerous in Egypt. The tyrannical pharaoh, fearing a Hebrew revolt, enslaves them and orders that every male Hebrew child be killed at birth.

Moses is born a member of this oppressed community and because of the resolve of his mother and sister, manages to survive the pharaoh's infanticidal plot. In English translations, we read that the baby Moses is placed in a floating basket in the river, but in the original Hebrew, it says that Moses is put inside a "teva" which is the word for "ark", used only one other time in the Bible in reference to Noah's ark. The name "Moses" means "drawn out of the water". So, Moses, like Noah, is one who is saved from the water for a godly purpose. Noah helps humanity to get a fresh start and Moses helps to liberate the Hebrew slaves and establish God's law.

Moses is rescued and adopted by the pharaoh's own daughter and grows up in the palace – a Hebrew interloper living in the home of his oppressor. One doesn't get the sense that the pharaoh's daughter hides Moses' true identity from the pharaoh. Perhaps the pharaoh just dismisses him as his daughter's insignificant pet. He is, after all, a slave.

But the pharaoh changes his mind about Moses after Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and kills him, burying the Egyptian in the sand before fleeing the pharaoh's wrath. Moses travels to the land of Midian where he marries Zipporah (a non-Hebrew) and becomes a shepherd with her father. Zipporah, like Moses' sister and mother and the pharaoh's daughter, is yet another woman who ends up rescuing Moses from death.

In Exodus 4, there is a confusing and disturbing incident when God plans to kill Moses, presumably for failing to circumcise his son in a timely manner.¹ Realizing the threat, Zipporah jumps into action, grabs a flint stone and quickly circumcises their son – an act that convinces God to spare Moses' life. Can you imagine this scene?! What that might have looked like? This woman wielding a knife, challenging an angry God who is prepared to kill her husband, the man who had just been chosen by God to save God's people? There have been centuries of biblical scholarship trying to crack the code of what exactly is going here, but it

¹ Exodus 4:24-26

remains a bit of a mystery. Nevertheless, Ziporah joins the company of women who protect Moses throughout his life.

Moses is often portrayed as a hero with God-given powers. I mean, they even got not one, but two of the Batmans – Christian Bale and Val Kilmer – to play Moses in Hollywood films. If you want to watch a truly cringy movie, I suggest Ten Commandments: The Musical starring Val Kilmer.

But I'm growing weary of the hero myth. Leaders like Moses never put in a solo effort and rarely do they lead without significant self-doubt and resistance to their calling. The Bible is riddled with reluctant prophets and leaders. When God calls on Jonah to preach bad news to the people of Nineveh, Jonah runs away! When God tells Gideon to help deliver the Israelites from bondage to the Midianites, Gideon says, "But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family!" When God calls on Jeremiah to be a prophet of doom, Jeremiah says, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." And when the angel appears to Mary to tell her that she is to be the mother of the Messiah, the gospel of Luke says that Mary is "troubled" by this message. In each of these cases, God reassures and persuades and tells God's servants that they should not be afraid of the path God has chosen for them.

Moses is no different. After Moses encounters God in the burning bush, God commands Moses to go tell the elders of Israel that God appeared to him. Then Moses says, "but what if they don't believe me and what if they don't listen to me?" and "I have never been good with words!" Moses' performance anxiety annoys God, but God provides a compromise, saying that God will get Moses' brother Aaron to do the speaking and Moses can perform miraculous signs to bolster the belief of the people.

I don't mean to be hard on Moses. Just the opposite. I feel for him. He doesn't want the weight of being the lone hero on his shoulders. He wants to collaborate and share his servanthood with others. Moses, like these other prophets and leaders, has dread about the task before him, but with the proper support, he is able to cope or be resilient to use a popular term.

Throughout this pandemic, I have been hearing the word "resilience" at every turn. It is a motivational word that is meant to encourage us individuals to adapt and carry on despite the hardships we face. Some of the definitions I found for resiliency are "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties" or "toughness" or "adapting well in the face of adversity". There are blogs you can read, groups you

can belong to on social media and workshops you can attend virtually that can help you to develop the skills necessary to learn resiliency. And corporations love this word! How can we as a company be resilient and teach our employees to be resilient so that our productivity doesn't fail. In this way, resiliency serves the corporate and capitalist project.

I, too, jumped on the resiliency bandwagon, but then I had a pivotal conversation with my friend Petra Hroch Tiessen about her doctoral dissertation in which she critiques the concept of resiliency. Petra wrote about this idea before the birth of CoVid19 and focuses on the example of people trying to get by during the economic crisis in California in 2007-2008. She refers to one documentary called *California Dreaming* which features different individuals who lost their jobs during the crisis and then found ways to be resilient despite their circumstances.

Herein lies the problem with *individual* resilience. Too often, individuals are forced to bear a heavy burden that shouldn't be theirs to bear alone. *I have to be tough. I have to be adaptable. I should love a challenge! I have to be innovative in the face of adversity.* Like the myth of the lone hero, the myth of individual resiliency demands that we pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and charge on despite enormous obstacles like unemployment, increased isolation and loneliness, loss of loved ones, anxiety over sending our kids back to school, and overall dread about the future of this cursed pandemic. It's too much for individuals to bear on their own. Like Moses, we need our families and our communities to help us bear this load.

So, is it better to talk about *social* resilience instead of *individual* resilience? That we can adapt better and get through things more effectively as a community? The documentary *California Dreaming* also features inspiring and innovative community projects where citizens collectively help one another out and exhibit a kind of social resilience. For example, one man who lost his job, grows produce in his front yard and shares with his neighbours. Sounds good, right?

The problem, according to my friend Petra, is that social resilience can put an unjust onus on a community to bear the entire burden of something like an economic collapse rather than resisting the system that caused the collapse in the first place. It is beautiful for communities to take care of themselves, but this doesn't fix the system that caused the need for resilience.

Social resilience within a *particular* community can also fail to provide for those individuals *outside* of that community who are both marginalized from community

and are failed by the bigger system. I don't think it's a coincidence that we are trying to be individually and socially resilient in the face of coronavirus while there are protests in the streets about issues of inequity and systemic injustice. We need a more expansive vision of social resilience that includes those outside of our proverbial neighbourhoods while resisting the systems that make resilience necessary.

I like to think that when God called to Moses and delivered the law, God wasn't just encouraging the Israelites to be socially resilient. God was calling for resistance against an oppressive system and for the establishment of a new system – a new law. *A holy grounding for a holy community.*

Unfortunately, we encounter a tension in the text which we cannot ignore where this group of liberated slaves become conquerors. Consider Exodus 3:7-8:

The LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

It's one of those parts of the Bible where you wish you'd quit reading a bit sooner. Nevertheless, it's a part of the story that we must face. When I read these lines, I think about my place in society as a white settler and the ways in which I must answer for my part in the history of Canada. What comes up in this text for you? I leave you with the following questions:

Who are you in this this story?

Are you an Israelite?

A Canaanite?

A settler?

A refugee?

And where is our burning bush in this holy moment? Do we have the humility to take off our shoes and walk the holy path God is calling us to walk?