

“Mountains, Valleys, and Caves: Moses On Mount Horeb”

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Exodus 3:1-6

I am so excited for the opportunity to preach this second week of our sermon series Mountains, Valleys, and Caves. **(SLIDE)** We started last week in Genesis and the setting for our text was Mt. Moriah where Abraham was tested by God and through it all God provided.

If you work your way through the rest of Genesis what you find is a whole lot of dysfunction from Abraham and his descendants. The Abraham narrative begins to wrap up in Genesis 23 and at that point we move into the Isaac narrative which is Abraham's son. We encounter a lot more dysfunction as Isaac has two sons named Esau and Jacob. Then around Genesis 28 the narrative really shifts from Isaac to Jacob. And talk about dysfunction. Jacob is in love with Rachel but he marries Leah. He's got a lunatic father-in-law, perhaps a few of you can relate to that.

Jacob has a lot of valley experiences as he tries to flee from his father-in-law and then he's fleeing from his brother who he had screwed over years before and eventually we get to Genesis 37 which is when we shift to the Joseph narrative. And for the rest of Genesis, we see lots of back and forth between Joseph and his crazy brothers and again a lot more dysfunction. But there's one theme that we see weaved all throughout Genesis. And that is the theme of God's redemption.

And that's a theme that is going to pick right back up as we enter Exodus. And honestly if you read the entire Bible, it's the #1 theme that you see in scripture: redemption. The story of God never leaving mankind to wallow in its dysfunction and brokenness, but constantly sending a rescuer to redeem us.

Now what we find out in chapter 1 of Exodus is that there's a new king in town and Pharaoh was NOT happy about how quickly the Israelites were multiplying. So he devises a scheme in which all of the newborn Hebrew boys should be killed. So once again the people need a rescuer. Of redemption. And in chapter 2 God sends Moses. Moses is sent down the river in a basket so that he would be saved from Pharaoh's murderous ways and he ends up living essentially in the penthouse because he is raised by pharaoh's daughter.

But before we get to chapter 3, we read that Moses murders an Egyptian and then has to flee for his life because once again Pharaoh wants him dead. Over and over what we have seen from Genesis 1 up to Exodus 3 is this cycle of brokenness and then redemption. Dysfunction and then redemption. And we pick up in chapter 3 having thought we had found our redeemer in Moses, but now we're back in a place of brokenness because he's a murderer on the run.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

What's interesting and a little bit paradoxical about this text is that I think most of us would call this a mountain top experience for Moses. When we think about mountains, valleys, and caves and then we think about God appearing to Moses in this miraculous way, we would probably call this a mountaintop experience. He's even by a Mountain, Mt. Horeb. But notice in the text that he's in the wilderness. I think Moses is both physically in the wilderness, but also emotionally as well.

Now if you grew up in church and maybe you went to VBS, you probably remember 2 things about Moses. He was the little boy who was rescued out of a basket in the Nile River. He was the miracle baby. And I'm guessing at your VBS they skipped over the fact that when he was a young man, he murdered an Egyptian and tried to hide the body. I mean I don't know, that would have probably been a fun craft or game to do with kids, but I think most VBS programs skipped that. **(SLIDE)** Your VBS probably jumped right to Moses parting the red sea. We have this grand idea of Moses as Charlton Heston receiving the 10 commandments from God, but the reality for Moses at this point in his life is that he is a lowly shepherd and a murderer who had ditched the body and run from his past. And that's why he's out here in this wilderness. They're not even his sheep; they're his father in law's sheep.

Forget for a minute who Moses becomes and what he's going to do later in life. I want you to see very clearly that at this point in Moses' life he's a complete nobody and up to this point he hasn't really amounted to anything. He is most definitely in a spiritual wilderness just waiting to get to that spiritual promised land or mountain top.

Church, you need to know that before you can get to the mountain top you will almost always have to wander in the valley and the wilderness like Moses did. And it's not just people, there are businesses and organizations that sometimes must wander in the wilderness. If any of you follow the WCA and the Global Methodist Church's emails, there has been a whole lot of wilderness imagery and analogies in their notes. Because the reality is that the United Methodist Church, much like Moses and the Israelites, has been wandering in the wilderness for many years now. We are a broken denomination just waiting for something to happen that would allow for an amicable split of the denomination so that a church like Asbury could be more fully aligned with churches from across the globe who are theologically and missionally aligned with us.

In spite of that, we are so blessed to be at a place like Asbury because we're able to sort of float above all of the bureaucracy and dysfunction, but I talk to so many friends and colleagues who just feel they're perpetually stuck in the wilderness because of our denomination. There are all kinds of ways we can feel like we're in the wilderness.

I'm going to guess that some of you this morning feel like you're in the midst of your own valley or wilderness. Maybe 2021 didn't go at all how you had planned. Maybe your marriage and family life aren't what it used to be. Maybe professionally you aren't where you thought you'd be at this point in your career. Maybe like Moses, you feel like you've been wandering in the wilderness for some time. Moses surely felt forgotten at this point in his life, but God hadn't forgotten him, and I want each of you to know this morning that God hasn't forgotten you. And you also need to know that it is when we are down and out and in the wilderness that God does his best work!

I want to read for you the 3 verses that appear immediately before this text that we just read. Here's what 2:23-25 says: (SLIDE)

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

I read you those verses to point out this: It's God's compassion that is driving all of this. God says I have seen the misery of my people, I know their pain and suffering and I am not going to stand idly by and let this continue. So, God comes down and says I will bring them out of slavery. And once again, we have this theme of redemption.

So, we know God has compassion for his people and that is going to lead him to redeem them and how's he going to do it? (SLIDE) **3:10, "Come Moses, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."** And I love the humanity in Moses' response in the very next verse, 11: **WHO AM I!??**

This is God's first encounter with Moses and it certainly won't be his last. And what you see in most of their encounters is God continually trying to re-assure Moses and what we see from Moses throughout most of his interactions with God is that he is a man who is consumed with his limitations.

So God comes to Moses with this huge task while he's at a very low point in his life and Moses starts to break down the tasks and he says to God, to even do this, I've got to be a great speaker and I'm not. In 4:10 (SLIDE) Moses says **"Oh my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."** As God comes to Moses with this grand plan and God says, Moses I want to bring you into this master narrative of mine. And what Moses does is he looks at this massive task, he looks at his limited resources and he says "No way God,

this is impossible.” The perspective of Moses is “I AM LIMITED and I CAN’T DO THIS.”

And let me tell you: Moses is right, you and I, we are limited. If you want to join into God’s story and be a difference maker in our world, you need to start by recognizing that you have limitations. But know this, that’s not the message that culture is going to try and sell you. Nike says, “Just do it.” Burger King says, “Have it your way.” Victoria’s Secret and just about every other clothing advertiser only shows perfectly chiseled and shaped bodies.

Culture even tries to sell this to our kids. One of my least favorite kids shows that fortunately my kids weren’t really into because it was mostly before their time is Blues Clues. **(SLIDE)** If you’re not familiar with the show, it’s basically about this little dog named Blue who sets out clues all throughout his house. And a college age guy, named Steve, with no job and apparently no real direction in life at all, searches around the house for these clues to figure out what his dog wants. And the show always concludes the same way each time. Steve sings this song that says: you know with me and you, and my dog blue, we can do anything that we wanna do.

And I remember listening to that and thinking that’s NOT TRUE!! You, me, and the dog can do anything we want to do? I can think of 1,000 things that you can’t do Steve! Hey Steve, you weigh about 120 pounds, go be an NFL lineman! You can’t Steve, you can’t! Not gonna happen. Get your dog to talk Steve! You can’t. Which is really weird because everything else on the show talks. The alarm clock, the end table, the cat next door. Everyone but the main character. It makes no sense. The only way that’s true Steve, is if you put major limits on what ya wanna do.

And lemme tell you, that’s true for you too. I mean I could stand up here and preach that message of: Ok church, you can do whatever you want. But that’s not all together true. For you all, you can do a lot of things. You can get a great job, you can make a nice living, you can buy a house, you can get a family, you can live a comfortable life. But when God comes to you and begins putting big life changing purposes in front of us, many of us shrink at the thought of that and begin focusing on all of our limitations.

Let me tell you, God isn’t into small purposes; God is into big life changing purposes. I don’t think God cares too much about our dreams of attaining a certain net worth or a certain title at work. God’s into “I want to change an entire city, I want to change a culture, I want to change a secular business into one that is winning people for Jesus. Gods into missions like: I want to see all of the children in foster care find homes and I want to see low-income children struggling in our public education system be better served. And let me tell you, I believe that is the desire of each of your hearts too. I believe hardwired into each of our DNA is a desire to make an impact on this world that will last generations beyond us. That’s why Thoreau said “Most men live lives of quiet desperation.”

Because I think so many people in our world, including those of us in the church, have settled for these small little lives where we get the degree and the spouse and we make the 6 figures and drive the Lexus and have the 2 story house in the burbs. And yet in the midst of that something in our hearts continue to scream at us that we are meant for more than this. We want bigger purposes. You want a God sized purpose for your life, whether you believe that or not, I believe it's true for every one of us in here. And when our hearts begin to grasp that reality and calling, we begin to realize that many of these purposes are bigger than what we can do.

Moses says: Big purpose, my limited resources and skills, I CAN'T DO IT! That's impossible, I'm too limited. And Moses is right, he was too limited and so are you. Now the problem in our story is that Moses stops right there. Moses misses the obvious reality that he's talking to God! And I think many of us miss this too. We get so consumed with focusing on our problems and our limitations and the fact that maybe we find ourselves in the wilderness like Moses and we just stop right there and we miss the fact that there's a real God who is at work and wants to work in your life and use you for incredible purposes.

God uses small, broken people to accomplish amazing God size purposes. If you don't believe me, read your Bible. God uses Abraham, an aging, wandering shepherd to give birth to the Israelite people. God uses Rahab, a prostitute, to help save the Israelites. God uses the disciples, 12 dysfunctional guys who were constantly bickering with one another and questioning Jesus to literally bring Christianity to the ends of the earth. God loves to use small, broken people, like you and ME, to bring redemption and justice to our world.

So God comes to Moses and he says "I want to liberate these people and I want to use YOU," and Moses' first response is: Who Am I!? And I love God's response. God doesn't say: You're Moses! You're a big shot, you can do this. God's like: I'm going to be there, there was never a thought in my mind where I thought you could pull this off. But I'm here! I'm here with you and we're going to do this together.

And Moses' 2nd objection, which we didn't read was: **(SLIDE)** Who are you? And the English translation from Hebrew is "I am who I am (3:14)." It's a Hebrew play on words and there's a whole sermon in and of itself in these verses, but the gist of it is this: Moses says Who should I say sent me? I mean who are you anyway? And God says tell them "I am who I am" has sent you. What that means is you tell them the only God that is out there, is the one sending me. I could illustrate it for you this way:

If I called my house, you know if I had a land line. If I called my house and someone else answered I would say: Is Mindy there? They might say: Can I ask who's calling? And I would say: Yea, it's her husband. And he might say: Which husband? I would say: Uhh, the only one! The one who is and has been and will be! That's who "I am who I am is." The God who was here in the beginning, will be here in the end and who is here and present right now. That's the God that is talking to Moses and that is the God who is present with us today.

But in chapter 4 Moses says “But God I don’t speak well, I’m not very eloquent.” And God’s response to Moses is great. He doesn’t say: “Oh Moses, you stop it, you’re great! You just need a little self-actualization.” No, God says in (SLIDE) 4:11, “Duh, I know that! Who do you think gives sight and hearing and speech? It’s me, God!” God is saying, “Moses, I know your limitations, I made you, but trust me, follow me, give your life to me.”

So, here’s our reality church: A big task with limited resources is nearly impossible. But a big task with limited resources with God is incredible. For all of you who are down on yourself, who think you don’t have anything to offer, who aren’t sure you could ever make a difference because of your weaknesses or your age or your socio-economic status, I want you to preach God to your shortcomings. Don’t preach your shortcomings to God.

Quit preaching your shortcomings to your friends and your family and to God and start preaching God to your shortcomings. Do you remember a few weeks ago when Tom talked about the major problems, we are seeing in public education right now and do you remember how he challenged us to do more to be a part of the solution? I believe there are some of you in here today who have the ability and the passion to bring about significant change in our crumbling public education system. I believe there are some adult discipleship communities here in this church who could step up and do more to solve our education crisis.

I believe there may be some parents and grandparents in here who could step up and help bring Christ back into our schools. It’s not going to be the government that does it for us, trust me, we don’t want that. It’s going to have to be us, the body of Christ. There are some of you in here today with the compassion to foster and adopt the 10,000 children in Oklahoma’s foster system. There are some of you in here with the gifts to bring medical care to many underserved parts of our state, country, and world. There are some of you in here with the know how to make a significant dent in the growing poverty and hunger problem in our country. If Christians aren’t going to step up to solve some of these major crises in our world, who will?

And so what am I asking of us today? I have 3 quick points of application #1: You need to spend time intentionally asking God: What are you calling me to do this year? What are you calling me to do with whatever years I have left in my life? God, how would you have me respond to the message of the Gospel in my life. If you’re not praying and seeking God’s calling on your life then don’t expect huge answers and action from God.

The 2nd point of application is this: you can’t do any of this alone. The Christian life was meant to be spent in community. If you read much of the Exodus story you quickly learn that the Israelites were a dysfunctional group of people, but in spite of all their bickering and their disunity, they could not have made it out of the wilderness without each other. They had incredible leaders like Joshua and Moses to challenge them and spur them on. They had peers like Jacob who encouraged them. The Israelites needed community, they needed leaders to teach them and challenge them and they needed friends and peers to encourage them and hold them accountable.

I believe each of us needs the same. Maybe some of you have some hurts habits and hangups and Celebrate Recovery is exactly the place you need to be on Monday evenings. Don't miss out on this incredible ministry. Maybe some of you have been teetering on the fence for a while about joining an adult discipleship community or one of our mid-week Bible studies. Maybe some of you know that one of our lifecare groups like Grief support groups or divorce care is exactly where you need to be, but you've just been afraid to pull the trigger. Let today be the day you make that commitment. Find someone on staff after this service and ask some questions about how you can get involved. Go to our website or send us an email later this afternoon so we can help you find your place here at Asbury.

Lastly, each of us needs redemption. Before any of us can become a rescuer like Moses, we ourselves need to be rescued. Before Moses began to live into these grand purposes for his life, he was a baby on his way to death and God rescued him out of the Nile and saved his life. The Gospel says you are beautiful in the image of God, but you are limited and you are broken by sin. The gospel says we are slaves just like the Israelites and the only way to be freed from that is to cry out to God for his mercy and redemption. And God sends us a rescuer.

Hebrews 3 says Jesus is the better Moses. He's the Moses that God sent to save us. Being a Christian means we say "I'm broken, and I can't fix myself. I can't overcome this anxiety, I can't overcome these addictions, I can't overcome this constant feeling of never living up to others' expectations. I can't fix myself." Following Jesus means we come before him and we confess our brokenness, because he is the ultimate rescuer and redeemer.