

Missing the Main Idea

A Sermon on Exodus 3:1-15 by the Rev. Philip Major
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This summer it will be nineteen years since I began attending seminary at the Boston University School of Theology. On my first day my first class started at 9 a.m. in the big lecture hall. Fifty of us sat in rows in our Hebrew Bible Survey course, the course where they teach you the basics of the part of the Bible we sometimes call 'The Old Testament'.

Our professor was Dr. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr was about five feet tall, but she commanded our attention as if she was nine feet tall. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr did not need a microphone, and her voice reverberated through the hall with conviction. That first day of class she asked us a question, "Who is the greatest prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures?" We squirmed nervously in our seats. Someone ventured, "Isaiah?" Wrong. Another person suggested, "Jeremiah?" Wrong again. The room was completely silent. We were afraid to say the wrong answer, but mostly, we didn't know the right answer. We were beginning to see our own ignorance.

Katheryn Pfisterer Darr seemed filled with frustration at our lack of understanding. The correct answer was Moses. Of course! Moses is the greatest prophet, and the most important person, in the Hebrew Scriptures. During the next fifteen weeks my classmates and I learned why Moses is the greatest prophet and the most important person in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In order to understand why Moses is the most important person in the Hebrew Scriptures, let's consider the Hebrew Scriptures as a group. This is a large collection of books. These books are not equal in importance for the Jewish people. Consider how it works with the New Testament books for us Christians. For Christians, the most important books are the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For the Jewish people, the most important books of the Hebrew Bible are the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books are called 'The Pentateuch', which is the Greek word meaning 'five books'. They are also called 'The Torah', which is the Hebrew word meaning 'law' or 'teaching'. As the four Gospels serve as the foundation for the rest of the New Testament and for the Christian faith, The Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, serve as the foundation for the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures and for the Jewish faith. These five books are also called 'The Law of Moses' because Moses is the main character in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

There is a reason I am making such a big deal about Moses being the central character, and the story of the Exodus being the central story of the Hebrew scriptures. The Christian Church is in a place of crisis. The first, obvious sign that the Christian Church is in a place of crisis is the fast pace of church closures. In 2024 about 15,000 churches permanently closed their doors. The second, obvious sign of crisis is the growing number of adults, including many of our children, who want nothing to do with organized religion. The third, obvious sign of crisis is that millions of Christians in America are pointing towards brutal tyrants, such as Vladimir Putin, as examples of effective leadership.

How did we get to this place of crisis in our Christian churches? I want to suggest the answer has something to do with the bewilderment of our class of fifty seminary students at our professor's question. Christians have missed the main point of the story. We have forgotten, or never paid enough attention to learn, that Moses is the most important character in the Hebrew Scriptures. We have forgotten, or perhaps we were never taught, that the Exodus is the story at the heart of our faith.

The story of the Exodus begins with Jacob, during the last chapters of the book of Genesis. Like many other characters in the Hebrew Scriptures, at an important point in his journey with God, Jacob's name was changed to Israel. There was a famine in the land and the sons of Israel moved to Egypt, where their brother Joseph was senior advisor to the King. From that time, and for many generations the descendants of the twelve sons of Israel lived in Egypt. Their population multiplied. They were identified as the Hebrew people by their language, and perhaps by their skin color or by the characteristics of their hair, and they were enslaved by the Egyptians.

Moses was a descendant of Israel, but he was raised in the household of the King of Egypt. This means he is a liminal character; he lives on the border between two identities. He is not a slave, like the rest of the Hebrew people, and he is not an Egyptian. One day Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. In anger he killed the Egyptian. Moses fled Egypt and travelled southeast, into the mountainous desert land called Midian. Very few people lived there.

A few verses before today's passage Moses came to a watering hole. Seven daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, came to the watering hole with their flocks. Moses saved their flocks when some malicious characters arrived. So Jethro gave his daughter, Zipporah, to Moses in marriage and welcomed him into his family. *Zipporah gave birth to a son. Moses named him 'Gershom', for he said, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land."* The story continues with the passage from Exodus read a few minutes ago. Let's consider a few of the most important ideas of this passage.

Let's notice Moses engages in an extended, direct conversation with God. This is just the first of many conversations that will continue through the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. There are many more conversations between Moses and God compared with any other character in the Bible. No one else comes close. Christians miss out on a large part of God's message when we pay little attention to Moses' story.

Moses commits a terrible crime, murdering the Egyptian, in response to the savage treatment of the Hebrew slave. Let's notice that Moses' close relationship with the King of Egypt will not protect him from the wrath of the King. Christians should be extremely wary of putting their trust in tyrants and dictators.

Let's notice that Moses is an alien resident in the land of Egypt, and part of a minority group that is exploited because of their status as aliens. Moses' situation goes from bad to worse when he flees Egypt and goes to the land of Midian where he is an alien in a foreign land. Moses, the alien, goes from one foreign country to another. Yet Moses is chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. Christians should not be chasing aliens and foreigners out of their lands.

God is paying attention to the people who are suffering. God hears their cries. God sees their misery. Christians should be doing the same, giving their attention to the people who are suffering.

Let's notice God will lead the slaves out of bondage in Egypt, but God will not lead alone. In verse ten God says to Moses, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." God's work will be accomplished through a partnership between God and Moses. Much of the time it seems like people expect God to do all of the heavy lifting. Most of the rest of the time it seems like people think they can do all of the heavy lifting with no concern for God's priorities. The work of faithful leadership will be achieved through a partnership between God and us.

Let's notice God is concerned with doing new work in the world. God's presence and identity are rooted in the past, yet in the present God is going to lead the people into a new future. God is going to create a new covenant with them. God is going to give them some new instructions.

Finally, let's not lose the main idea of the story. The Exodus is a story of God bringing the people of Israel out of slavery and exploitation into freedom. God's concern is for the people to be free. The Exodus is not a story of God giving more freedom and power to those who are already powerful, it's a story of God giving basic human rights and freedom to those who have been oppressed.

The Exodus story is our foundation. God wants people to have freedom and basic human rights. God's concern is for those who are being held in bondage, for those who are suffering, for those who are aliens in a foreign land. God is with the people who are struggling to make their way out of oppression to a better life. Like many of us, Moses is a person who doesn't fit neatly into the categories of the oppressed or the oppressors. God needs all sorts of people, including those who live in that in-between space, to serve the people as leaders. God has been with us from the beginning, from before we built these buildings or began singing these songs, but God is partnering with us to do some completely new work in the present.