Last night our family returned home from a week of vacation on Cape Cod. During vacation I read a great new novel, called The Vanishing Half. After I finished the book, I passed it on to Kathy. Eleanor had read the book before either of us.

So last night we sat around the dinner table talking about the story. We asked questions of each other. Who do you think is the central character? What is the main message of the story? Since we were talking about a novel, the conversation was light and lively.

We could ask the same sorts of questions when it comes to Holy Scripture. For instance, who is the central character in the New Testament? Most people would say it’s Jesus. What is the main message of the New Testament? Most people would say it has something to do with the power of love.

Today I am going to make a fairly bold, related claim about the Old Testament. Just as there is a single character at the center of the New Testament, my bold claim is that there is a single character at the center of the Old Testament. The person in the center of the story of the Old Testament is Moses.

It might seem ridiculous to identify a single main character because the Old Testament is an enormous collection of books, created over a span of 1000 years and covering many centuries of the history of the people of Israel. It is difficult to identify a single, central character. We could consider many familiar characters, such as Abraham, Joseph or David.

If I were to choose one person as the central character of the story, I would choose Moses. Moses was the greatest prophet of Israel. Moses had more, and more dramatic, powerful interactions with God than any other person in the Old Testament.

Moses has the longest, deepest impact on the nation of Israel. Moses was the one who received the ten commandments from God, as well as entire books of the law, such as the book of Leviticus. Moses led his people to make a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai. This founding covenant is known as the Mosaic covenant, in other words, as ‘Moses’ Covenant’. The first five books of the Bible are the foundation of all of the Jewish scriptures, and all five of them are traditionally attributed to Moses.

Moses was the greatest leader of Israel. Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness for over forty years to the land that would come to be called Israel. Moses is in the center of the fundamental story of the Hebrew people, which is the Exodus, the deliverance of an oppressed people, from slavery to freedom.

Just as Jesus is the central character of the New Testament and the central message of Jesus’ story is about God’s passionate quest for the power of love to be in the center of our lives, so too, Moses is the central character of the Old Testament and the central message of Moses’ story is about God’s passionate quest for freedom for all people, and especially for freedom for those who are oppressed.

I’m making all of this fuss about identifying the big picture because, especially when we are reading the Old Testament, we are prone to get lost and confused by all of the details.

I’m making all of this fuss about Moses being the central character of the Old Testament because it never even occurred to me that there might be a central character in the Old Testament until I was 45 years old, listening to Katherine Pfisterer Darr’s teach us about the big picture of the Old Testament in seminary. Before I listened to Dr. Darr, I never even considered that Moses was a prophet. I’ll never forget the look on her face the day we were studying the prophets and she asked us a very basic question. Who was the greatest prophet in the history of the people of Israel? All sixty of us seminarians looked perplexed, sitting in the big lecture hall. A few people ventured guesses: Isaiah? Jeremiah?

And Dr. Darr just looked at us, her expression growing stronger and her face filling with color as she asked the question again, “No really, who was the greatest prophet in the history of Israel?” It was Moses.
It was Moses who led the people out of slavery in Egypt. It was Moses who argued with Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” It was Moses who received the 10 commandments and gave them to the people for the first time. It was Moses who became so enraged when the people created a statue of a calf and worshipped the statue that he broke the stone tablets into pieces and had to hike all the way back up the mountain to plead with God and get a second copy. It was Moses who heard the voice of God speaking to him over and over again.

I’m making all of this fuss about the central message of the Old Testament being a message of freedom because we don’t seem to understand the centrality of the idea of freedom in our Holy Scriptures. We don’t seem to understand that freedom is the idea in the center of the Old Testament. We don’t seem to understand that all of the stories in the book of Genesis are in some way leading up to the story of the Exodus we are beginning today. We don’t seem to understand that all of the stories after the story of Moses look back in some way to the story of the freeing of the slaves.

When we read about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon we forget that all of this is related to the first time the descendants of Abraham were slaves, back in Egypt. We get so easily bogged down in the details, and we should be patient with ourselves. This is not like reading a novel or a trilogy. But all of the stories in the Old Testament are related to the story of Moses, the story we are just beginning to read today. All of the stories in the Old Testament are related to the Exodus, God’s deliverance of the people out of slavery and into freedom.

I’m making a fuss that God’s central concern has to do with establishing freedom for all people because we have misappropriated the idea of freedom to serve our own purposes, rather than God’s purposes. For example, many Americans take pride in the idea that freedom is a fundamental part of our nation. Yet when the idea of freedom was first articulated in our constitution, the idea of freedom only applied to white men, not to women and not to Americans of African descent or native peoples. This is the exact opposite of God’s intention for freedom for all people. The story of America has often been directly at odds with God’s true concern, which is freedom for those who have been enslaved and oppressed.

When many of us hear the word ‘freedom’ today we don’t think about Moses. When people talk about freedom we might think about the photos and videos we have seen of rude people demanding the freedom to not wear a mask during the pandemic. When we hear the word ‘freedom’ we might think of angry men demanding the freedom to carry and use weapons that could kill dozens of people with a single pull of the trigger.

We have misappropriated the idea of freedom to serve our purposes, rather than God’s purposes. A story in the newspaper on Thursday told about an organization that is spreading misinformation about voting, in an attempt to keep people of color from voting. The name of the organization is ‘Freedomworks’. It appears the Freedomworks people only want freedom for white people, for rich people, for powerful people.

This is the exact opposite of God’s message in the story of the Exodus. God is concerned with freedom for those who are oppressed. God is concerned with power and freedom and for those who have been made powerless in the world. God is concerned for the welfare and well-being and self-determination of those whose ancestors were kept in chains.

When we look around us, we see that freedom is the urgent need felt by people everywhere. Today people in Belarus are in the streets, demonstrating against an authoritarian leader, risking their lives for the sake of freedom. Today in China and in Hong Kong, news reporters and political dissidents are pushing back against an authoritarian government, for the sake of freedom. Today in America, people are working to ensure that all people are able to exercise the right to vote on election day, November 3rd.

You and I and the little baby we are baptizing today, Gabriella, are called to be like Moses’ big sister. You and I are called to be like the midwives in the story of Moses. You and I are called to take a risk for the sake of freedom. There will be times in our lives when we will have to raise our voices and ask the question for the sake of freedom for those who have been oppressed. You and I are called to be participants in God’s story of freedom.