

“Learning to Listen”  
June 14, 2020

Numbers 11:24-30

You just heard Lisa read a Scripture lesson from the Bible that’s hard to decipher out of context. In order to grasp what’s going on in today’s passage from the Book of Numbers, you have to know the back story first.

Here’s a synopsis, then, of how we got to where we are this morning. Once upon a time when Moses was born, Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, decreed that all the Israelite male babies should be killed. Fearing that Moses would be among Pharaoh’s victims, Moses’ mother gave birth to Moses, placed him in a papyrus basket and sent him floating down the river, hoping that someone would rescue him and raise him safely.

One can only imagine how desperate Moses’ parents must have been to scheme such a reckless idea. But lo and behold, the plan worked. One day, none other than the daughter of Pharaoh herself was down at the river bathing and she found baby Moses in the papyrus basket safe and sound. And she proceeded to pull Moses out of the water and raise him as her own.

There is the first part of the back story. Moses was actually raised in Pharaoh’s palace, surrounded by the very people who were brutally enslaving and oppressing his Hebrew brothers and sisters. So right off the bat, we know two things about Moses. He did not grow up among his Hebrew people and therefore was a Hebrew outsider. And he was raised with a huge amount of privilege because of the powerful people who raised him and the opulent setting in which he was raised.

Well Moses grew older and one day when he was out in the fields, he saw an Egyptian overseer beating one of the Hebrews. Enraged at this callous display, Moses killed the Egyptian overseer and subsequently fled from Egypt to avoid any repercussions for his actions. Not long after that, when Moses was out in the wilderness, self-banished from his own community, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and told Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt.

All of a sudden, this man who had grown up in wealth and privilege, effectively shielded from the brutality faced by his Hebrew brothers and sisters, was now being asked by God to be the leader of those same Hebrew people. To be asked by God to lead anyone is an awesome, intimidating request. For Moses, who grew up in a sheltered environment, who faced no suffering at the hands of any Egyptian, who had earned little street credibility in his Hebrew community, and who was not trained to be a leader of people in any way, shape or form, God’s ask was overwhelming.

It took Moses some rationalizing and bargaining with God before Moses agreed to do God’s bidding. And sure enough, with God’s help, Moses eventually led his people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and into the wilderness, leaving Pharaoh and his army

drowned in God's wake. From there, the Hebrew people journeyed for years with Moses at the helm all the way to the foot of Mount Sinai...where Moses went up to the peak of the mountain, saw God face to face, and received from God two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written upon them.

Unfortunately, when Moses came back down the mountain with one stone tablet tucked under each arm, he heard the raucous sounds of people laughing and carrying on. Moses walked into the Hebrew camp and he saw people partying without inhibition. And then, he spotted the coup de grace. Moses noticed a golden calf in the middle of the camp with the Hebrew people bowed down in worship around it.

The sinfulness, the idolatry, the debauchery Moses witnessed that day fueled in him a violent rage. So incensed was Moses, in fact, that he lifted the two stone tablets high over his head and smashed them down on the ground below his feet.

The spontaneous destruction of the Ten Commandments was Moses' dramatic attempt to bring the camp under control. It was all about restoring law and order in the name of God. Unfortunately for Moses, from God's perspective what Moses did came across more like a political photo-op. With Moses using the Ten Commandments as a prop to support his own personal agenda. The Ten Commandments weren't Moses' to hold in his hands as symbolic propaganda before smashing them to bits. On the contrary, the Ten Commandments were God's words to be protected and cherished.

Moses wouldn't know the full ramifications of his actions that day until he finally arrived on the top of Mount Nebo years later as an old man. God's Promised Land stretched out before his eyes in all its glory. And Moses had led the Hebrew people through the wilderness to the threshold where they could almost reach out and touch the land flowing with milk and honey. But God made sure Moses died on Mount Nebo without setting foot in the Promised Land...in large part because God remembered that fateful day when Moses destroyed God's commandments...

In a nutshell, I've just told you the abbreviated story of Moses' life. Which gives us a lens through which to interpret today's story from Numbers.

As far as a timeline, today's narrative takes place sometime during the wilderness period. Moses and his people have already escaped from Egypt. Moses has already received the Ten Commandments on the top of Mount Sinai. And Moses has already come down Mount Sinai, witnessed his people disobediently worshipping a Golden Calf, and shattered God's stone tablets on the ground in anger.

In today's story, we hear about the Hebrew people grumbling amongst themselves. Again. They're tired of eating manna for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. They're tired of constantly being on the move and not settled in one place. They're tired of trusting God that they will ever see the Promised Land. The Hebrew people are frustrated and grumpy.

It falls to Moses as the leader to try and figure out what to do. But this time, Moses thinks a bit before acting impulsively. He replays in his mind the scene at the foot of Mount Sinai with all the chaos and the partying. He recalls the gut instinct which told him to shatter the Ten Commandments. Then he makes a conscious decision to try a different tack.

God instructs Moses to gather seventy elders from among the people to meet with Moses. Hear what they have to say. Listen with an open mind. Trust the Holy Spirit to work through the whole group. And dialogue about how to fix and improve everyday life in the camp going forward.

As a leader who had scarce training or relevant life experience to draw from, the idea that he should share responsibility for the well being of the people with seventy wise, anointed elders...that notion had never occurred to Moses. Growing up in Pharaoh's palace, Moses was much more familiar and comfortable with the Lone Ranger approach. Don't listen to your people...force them to toe the line. Get everything and everyone under control and let them know who is in charge.

Except that leadership approach didn't work at the foot of Mount Sinai. It didn't work for the Hebrew people, who continued groaning and complaining in today's Scripture lesson, even though they no longer had a Golden Calf to worship. And it certainly didn't work for God, who watched in consternation as Moses obliterated the Ten Commandments.

In this morning's Scripture lesson, Moses realized it wasn't all about him. It was about working together with good advisors and finding solutions that worked for the entire community...for all the people...

Well, the seventy elders could have been the end of today's story. But it wasn't. No sooner had the seventy elders gathered to meet, than word came back to Moses about two men stirring the pot out in the camp; Eldad and Medad.

Apparently Eldad and Medad never got the memo about the meeting. Or they weren't part of the in group of seventy elders. Or they wanted quicker and more just and more radical change than others in the camp. In any case, Scripture tells us Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp. Which is another way in the Bible of saying they protested in the camp. And a young man informed Moses about what Eldad and Medad were up to.

Joshua, the son of Nun, heard the young man's report and tried to call Moses out. "My lord Moses, stop them!" What happened to law and order? Get those two men and the people in the camp under control!

But Moses wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. Here's what Moses said in response to Joshua. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them."

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them. Can you hear that? Moses didn't command Eldad and Medad to cease and desist their protesting. Moses didn't threaten Eldad and Medad. He didn't kneel on their necks or tear gas them or shoot them with rubber bullets or shove them to the ground or beat them with batons.

Rather, Moses made a bold and compelling statement. It's fine if Eldad and Medad and God's people want to protest. Those protestors may well be the ones God fills with God's Holy Spirit.

This time around, Moses chose to listen to the people without anger and condemnation. And this time around, Moses chose to trust God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that works when people come together to discuss issues of justice and equality. The Holy Spirit that works when people protest for transformation and new systems. And the Holy Spirit that works when people learn to listen and hear one another's stories and grievances before rolling up their sleeves to bring about change...

God willing, you and I and the leaders and people of this nation will choose the way of Moses his second time around. Declaring through our words and our deeds that black lives matter. Choosing to be allies by walking alongside black men, women, youth and children who prophesy and protest seeking change. Learning to listen carefully to the voices of our brothers and sisters who are oppressed and disenfranchised and killed for no good reason. And trusting God's Holy Spirit to lead all God's people forward to a better and more just day. Amen.

**NOTE: I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel, Senior Pastor of the First Congregational Church, UCC, in Dubuque, Iowa, whose sermon on Sunday, June 7, 2020, entitled "Moses and the Protestors," inspired this choice of Scripture lesson and this sermon.**