

## Call of Moses and Peter's Stumble

Exodus 3:1-15 & Matthew 16:21-28

August 2020

### **Genesis 3.1-15**

**3** 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.

**7** Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, **8** and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of 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 place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. **9** And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. **10** Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." **11** But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" **12** He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

**13** Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."<sup>[a]</sup> And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" **15** God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

### **Matthew 16.21-28**

#### *Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection*

**21** From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. **22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." **23** But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

#### *Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus*

**24** Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. **26** For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? **27** For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. **28** Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

## **Introduction**

These are possibly scary readings!

They tell stories of how a real God takes people he calls to the edge and beyond!

## **Moses**

Firstly we heard the fundamental story of the Lord God connecting with Moses in mid-career. He was not a young man with dreams and hopes like Joseph yet not as old as Abraham. He was marked by life's dramas and now spending his days out with his father-in-law's sheep, no doubt reflecting on who he had become and where he had been.

Let's trace the day we read about:

In the wilderness with sheep. It is hot! Wandering with sheep is slow moving business but at a moment his attention is caught beyond the flock. His mind is focused by the unusual -but apparently not unknown- sight of a burning bush which was not consumed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Science has some light to throw on this but I'll leave you to google that.

With his attention awoken and mind focused we are carefully told that the ‘Angel of the Lord’ -some heraldic messenger- engages him as if in advance of God himself.

Then it comes, God is there. Moses is not alone. He feels addressed. This place is like ‘Bethel’ of Jacob. This is beyond words but Moses hears. There is a depth of presence as the ‘ground of all being’ is with him.

Moses responds in Hebrew as *Hineni* / “Here I am”, or in contemporary English: ‘At your service’. It’s time to take off sandals as this has become holy ground.

That’s the core encounter. Then comes the commission to service.

Moses doubts.

God reassures, and finally this God he is with reveals His name. You can address me by this name and I will respond. This is who I AM.

This is an awesome encounter between the Lord God most Holy and a mortal man, a compromised soul going nowhere fast. This is a huge illustrative example of what God does. It involves attraction, focused attention, fear, a call to service and revelation in relationship and doubt. In words of C.S. Lewis: This is so “good but not safe.”

From what I have seen, Mother Theresa’s story has similar features. Such an encounter ruins one for the ordinary and any hope for business as usual.

Who wants to be Moses here?

Last year I got to stand on Mt. Nebo in current day Jordan. This is where Moses was last seen looking across the Jordan Valley to the land he would not enter. It never got easy for him.

### **Peter and Jesus**

That was an encounter with some typical features as found throughout the Bible.

In Matthew 16 comes another encounter as also described in Mark 8.

Peter has already been inspired by the Father to say that Jesus is the Christ, The Son of the Living God. He is now told what that will mean for Jesus and those who really follow him.

Peter and the disciples are now taken into that deeper appreciation and it does not land sweetly!

Something of the burning bush moment now comes for Peter but he is not at all ready for it.

Jesus explains the nature of his messiahship and, as Isaiah predicted: He will be that Suffering Messiah.

Peter buckles at this. It blows his mind and as anxious people sometimes do, he tries to manage upwards!

Jesus responds by rebuking his friend and would be manager.

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

What happened to ‘nice Jesus’? Isn’t Peter entitled to an opinion?

Something fundamental is coming into view:

God seeks new life requiring present death. That’s the work of the cross.

Jesus was there then in first century Israel/Palestine/Jordan/Lebanon to pioneer this and lead people into it. This is his Way.

So having rebuked Peter he gives an explanation in v.24.

<sup>24</sup> ... Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

There it is. This is God’s messianic map for salvation. Lose it so God can reinstate it. We are on our way to cross and resurrection led by the Messiah.

So for Peter and the twelve to consider: Do you keep the map that seeks to enhance human flourishing and see the Kingdom in Israel through good people obeying God as King, or do you accept the path Jesus points to involving a cross every day as you die to yourself and the world you know?

It’s a choice between preserving and enhancing our own power or letting go to seek God’s power through daily encounter at the cross? This is very challenging and life defining choice Jesus defines.

This is what differentiates Christian faith from Christian religion in the extent to which the cross is embraced as central for the believer.

### Reflection

I have thus far been considering how two powerful stories of people being confronted by God to leave what they know and walk a new path overlap or throw light on each other.

Scripture has this power to throw light on other passages within the integrity of the Bible.

I am going to bring in a third passage that I think really brings this into church land. It’s from 2 Timothy 3 where St Paul is spelling out some of the tough realities of pastoring a church to his young friend, Timothy. This is a passage I had read at both my installation services, including Eindhoven in 2002.

We don’t have time for the full passage which Paul warns Timothy of what he can expect in church as things progress. In v.5 comes a frightening warning about certain people: “having the appearance of godliness, [or, ‘having the form of religion.’ or holding to the outward form] but denying its power.” The instruction is to avoid such people.

#### 2 Timothy 3.5 in context

<sup>1</sup> You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. <sup>2</sup> For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup> inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, <sup>4</sup> treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, <sup>5</sup> **holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!** <sup>6</sup> For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, <sup>7</sup> who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

The encounters of Moses and Peter illustrate that God meets people at cost. The cost is brokenness. Jacob walked away with a limp. There is something cross shaped in the journey with God for all who hear and respond.

But it’s difficult. Peter balked in fear at this and Moses was afraid and doubted. We humans tend to want to seek God and follow in forms of piety and at a safe distance rather than get in close and possibly get burnt.

The cost of this social distance with God is running with the forms of piety but never encountering the power of faith.

When faith leads us to die in some way, God’s power and life in us grows.

Paul is telling Timothy to hang out with dying people who know God’s power and avoid those who get their bundle together with religious and pious support but know nothing of God’s power.

*My sad illustration from 2008 at John de Wit’s Installation in Utrecht*

## **Application**

In the months of pandemic lock-down we have been denied many longstanding forms of piety, faith and church. No congregational singing, no music bands, no exchange of 'The Peace', minimal Communion, no gatherings in person and it's not over! Don't expect carol services at Christmas.

The things we do to live and express our piety or faith have been stripped away as never before in our experience.

But hear Paul to Timothy, Jesus to Peter and God to Moses. The power is not there in steady stable humanity advancing piety before God. The power is when we allow ourselves to die so that God can live his life in us as his servants, even as suffering servants.

The power comes from hearts breaking for God.

Moses knowing himself as afraid, unholy, and full of doubt being called to God's service. Not very comfortable!

Peter seeing his hopes for bloodless redemption of Israel with him in senior position snuffed out with talk of a cross, not only for Jesus but for him too. Terrifying!

Paul advising Timothy to simply avoid all contact with self-serving people who want to make religion work for them. They talk cross but avoid it and remain disempowered.

## **Conclusion**

So friends, as we shortly prepare to break bread to proclaim, affirm and receive Christ, let this be a breaking moment in our life. A moment of honest engagement with Christ -God among us in bread and wine- broken and poured out for us.

Let this be an inner acceptance of Christ's call to follow him as the crucified messiah sharing his life with us.

Let this be our enactment of our decision to follow Christ -really and not just in form.

Let this be a place where the Holy God and mortal soul meet in Christ.