

“Biblical Characters of the Bell Curve: Late Adopters (Moses)”

Exodus 3:1-6; Numbers 13:25-14:9; Judges 7:1-8 ¹

It was truly a fine morning in the high country. Although the land was arid and rocky, the 5,000 foot altitude moderated the heat. There had been no predator attacks lately, and all of his sheep were accounted for.

A rain shower just at dawn had cleansed the air, and it seemed as though he could see forever. In one direction, he could see Mount Horeb,² and in the other direction, toward the Gulf of Aqaba, he imagined that he could see home.

Yes, it was a fine morning; but the shepherd did not begin to imagine the strange turn that his life would take today; nor would he ever have believed that Mt. Horeb would eventually be named for him: Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses.

You may remember that Moses had grown up as the Prince of Egypt, the adopted son of Pharaoh, probably about 1400 B.C. His life had changed drastically one day when he saw an Egyptian foreman cruelly beating a Hebrew slave in the brickyard. Being a Hebrew himself—though this was a closely-guarded secret—Moses killed the Egyptian in a fury, and became a wanted man.

Running for his life, Moses ended up in Midian, on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, where he eventually married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the Priest of Midian, and became a shepherd. Even this was long ago now, and on this particular morning, Moses was already 80 years old.

After striking camp, Moses moved his sheep along, looking for another spot where they might graze. As they rounded a bend, Moses noticed a bush that was on fire. Now it did sometimes happen that lightning ignited tinder-dry vegetation, but there hadn't been any storm. However it came to be burning, though, the bush should have burned to ashes in two minutes, like a three-week old Christmas tree, but it kept on burning . . . and burning . . . and burning. Moses walked over to check this out—and discovered that the surprises had only begun.

Suddenly a Voice began calling his name: **“Moses! Moses!”** *“Here I am,”* he replied, realizing in rather a shock that the Voice was coming from the bush!

“Do not come any closer,” the Voice said. **“Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”**

Moses covered his face, because he was afraid to look at God—or at whomever or whatever this was. Moses had heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but those guys had lived a long time ago. As far as he knew, nobody had heard from this God in 500 years. “Lucky me,” he thought ruefully.

“I have come to rescue my people,” the Voice continued. **“I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”**

Moses sat down on a rock in shock. Sure, he'd grown up as the Prince of Egypt, but that was forty years ago. Things were different now.

“Who am I to do such a thing?” he said. “I’m a nobody. Just look at me, here in the middle of the desert with a bunch of sheep! If you want me to do something, how about something I can

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on September 7, 2014.

² At 7,498 feet, Horeb is neither the highest nor the most spectacular of the peaks of Sinai.

do? I like being a shepherd. I like the silence of the wilderness. I enjoy keeping my own company. You've got the wrong guy to talk to Pharaoh. They'll laugh me right out of the palace . . . or worse, they'll kill me. I've got a bad record in Egypt, remember? They may still have my picture up in the post office."

"I WILL BE WITH YOU," the Voice said. Moses didn't know then that his knowledge of the desert was precisely the point. He had no idea that he was about to lead his people through that very same desert . . . for 40 years.

"Now look," Moses said. "Suppose I do go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What god are you talking about? What is his name?' Then what am I going to say? It's been a pretty long time since we've heard from you, you know; and people aren't as gullible as they used to be."

"I need no name to distinguish me from other gods. I am the ONE God, the ONLY God. Other gods simply do not exist. I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

"That's not a very clear answer," Moses said. "I don't think it will work. They won't believe me."

Now the Voice told Moses to throw down his shepherd's staff. When it hit the ground, it turned into a large snake. When Moses grabbed it by the tail, it became a staff again. **"Put your hand inside your robe,"** the Voice said, and when Moses did, his hand came out horribly diseased. **"Do it again,"** said the Voice, and now Moses' hand came out healed.

"Okay, that's impressive," Moses said. "But you need to know that I'm not a good speaker. I never have been, and I'm not now, even after you've spoken to me. I'm clumsy with words. The sheep and I get along okay, but with people I get all tongue-tied. Why do you think I'm out here by myself?"

"WHO MAKES MOUTHS, for heaven's sake! Don't you think I know what you can and can't do?! I will help you! Now GO!"

"Nope. Send somebody else." Moses had run out of excuses. Now he simply refused to go.

"Look," God said, **"I knew you would do this. But I've already taken care of it. Your older brother, Aaron, is a good speaker, and he is also better at obeying than you are. Aaron is already on the way to meet you. I'm going to reveal my messages to you, and Aaron will deliver them to Pharaoh. Now GET GOING!"** And Moses went.

As we continue our consideration of "Biblical Characters of the Bell Curve," Moses didn't run as fast as he could in the opposite direction, as Jonah did, but he did do his dead-level best to drag his feet, didn't he? Although I think we'd be within our rights to consider Moses in the "Laggard" category, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and call him a "Late Adopter."

Fast forward now from Exodus to Numbers. As chapter fourteen begins, several years have passed, and Moses has in fact guided his people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, through that very same wilderness, to this very same mountain. Now they're at the border of the Promised Land, and the scouting party has returned with a discouraging report. Five-to-one, the scouts said, **"We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!"** (Numbers 13:31).

The people cried all night and then their voices rose up in a great chorus of complaint against Moses: “*We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!*” they wailed. . . . “*Let’s choose a leader and go back to Egypt!*” (Numbers 14:2-4). But Joshua and Caleb, two of the twelve spies, said, “*The land we explored is a wonderful land! And if the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. . . . Do not rebel against the LORD, and don’t be afraid of the people of the land. . . . They have no protection, but the LORD is with us!*” (Numbers 14:7-9).

Now fast forward again, to the present, to this very morning. You and I find ourselves at a place rather similar to Israel’s gazing across at the Promised Land. At the moment we probably have a smaller number of active members than we’ve had for some time, although the commitment of our “core” is considerable. If we look at this situation as a “glass half-empty,” as ancient Israel did on Jordan’s banks, then we might find cause for despair. We might find ourselves wanting to return to some “safe place” in the past.

But if, on the other hand, we look at where we are as a “glass half-full,” as a place to which we’ve been brought by God’s hand, we could say that we have a larger percentage of our active membership present for nearly any given service or meeting than we’ve had for a long time. We could say that a larger percentage of our active members are truly active and committed than at any time in recent memory. And that’s good.

Being a smaller group at the moment also makes it possible for us to get nearly everyone together for seasons of prayer and renewal as we recommit ourselves to what God is bringing to birth among us. The future isn’t up to us, after all. It’s not our church.

I’m reminded of Gideon’s experience long ago. When Gideon headed out to do battle and take new territory, God said, “**You have too many soldiers. If you win the battle with that many men, you’re going to think you won it yourself.**” So Gideon sent two-thirds of his army home. God said, “**That’s still too many.**” So Gideon sent 97% of his remaining army home, leaving him with 300 soldiers—less than one percent of his initial force. And God said, “**That’ll do**” (Judges 7). Do you know how many active members we have right now? Probably something just short of 300.

And do you know what’s true about the 300 of us? Our relationships with each other are healthy and strong. Our commitment to God’s purposes is clear. Our commitment to our life together is solid. Our willingness to sacrifice for Kingdom causes is proven. And God is saying to us, as God said to Gideon and his army, “**Don’t look at what you can do. Watch what I’m going to do, if you’ll do what I tell you to do!**”

At 300, we’re running lean. We’re agile. We can make changes. We don’t need to be worrying about questions of maintenance or survival. We need to be boldly imagining what it would take for us to become a major force for the Kingdom of God in Columbia.

The call of Moses reminds us that God works through ordinary folks to accomplish His purposes in the world. Moses’ call reminds us that things we view as insignificant resources, such as a stick and a bush, are major assets if they’re available to God. God told Moses, “**I don’t need a pretty bush or an educated bush or an eloquent bush. Any old bush will do as long as I’m in the bush.**”³

³ Major Ian Thomas, cited by Luis Palau in *Men of Integrity*, May/June 2002.

Sometimes, perhaps more often than we really want to admit, God calls our attention to some specific deed or task. We recognize the spiritual prompting, but we feel inadequate for the job. Like Moses, we're tempted to make excuses: "I'm too old"; "I'm too feeble"; "I'm too busy"; "I've done my time." "Making commitments makes me nervous. I want to keep my options open."

And like Moses, even if we respond to God's call, we're not promised an easy life. We're not promised creature comforts or worldly success. To the contrary, we're promised difficulty, challenge and suffering. *But we're also promised a life of intimate fellowship with God.* We're promised that even when we walk through dark valleys, God will never, ever abandon us. And with that promise, no mountain is too high, no river too deep, no desert too wide, no evil is strong enough to keep us from accomplishing that work to which God calls us!

So here's the point: like Moses, God calls each one of us to some general works in God's Kingdom as well as to a specific work in God's Kingdom. In general terms, God intends for every one of us to place our faith in the Risen Christ and to join ourselves meaningfully to His Body, the Church. God intends for each of us to be continually growing in spiritual maturity, and the Bible study groups that begin next Sunday provide a convenient mechanism for such growth. God intends for each of us to use our gifts in service to the Church and on mission in the world.

But God has more specific purposes for your life as well. You may already know what some of those purposes are, but you may not think you do. Don't fret about what you don't understand. Be obedient to the Light you already have, and you'll get more.

As God's purposes in your life begin to become clearer, you may think you're not suited for them. You may think that you don't have much spare time for such things. You may say to God, "I don't witness very well. I've never taught a class or led a study group before. I have no idea how to visit for the church. I don't know those people, anyway." Does any of that sound familiar?

My friends, God will accomplish His purposes in the world with us or without us. But God invites us to be a part of the action and to enjoy the benefits and the adventure of that participation. Moses did everything he could think of to avoid being obedient to God's purposes; but once he started out, he never looked back. And as Moses grew in his obedience, the Bible tells us that God talked with Moses "face to face" as a man speaks with his friend (Exodus 33:11).

My friends, the great heroes and heroines of Scripture had "clay feet" just as we do. They were far from perfect examples of piety, talent, or obedience. Yet God used them to change the world. How will it be with you? When God's call comes, we are free to raise questions and objections, and God will take them seriously, but the call remains.

Albert Schweitzer put it this way: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side, He came to those . . . who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' *and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.* He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."⁴

⁴Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd. ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 401.