

Listen, You Rebels!

A big part of learning to understand the Bible is learning to differentiate between the various genres of literature that the Bible contains and discerning the approach to truth in those different genres and in the different stories they tell. There is a difference between history and poetry, between parable and proverb. Even in passages that are pretty clearly telling a story that we are meant to understand as a fairly straightforward relating of past events, such as today's Scripture, we have to be discerning about why that story is being told. What are we to learn? Is the story preserved in our Scriptures as a positive example for us or as a negative one? More and more over the years as I've encountered or re-encountered stories in the Bible that have made me squirm, I've come to wonder if what I'd assumed was an encomium, a positive example, was actually a warning.

Generally speaking, Moses and his siblings are among the heroes of both Christianity and Judaism. From an early age, we learn about Miriam, the brave girl who helped to save her baby brother by encouraging the Egyptian princess to adopt him, her brother Aaron, who became the first high priest of Yahweh among the Children of Israel, and, of course, their youngest brother Moses, the liberator of his people. But when we read their stories in the Pentateuch or Torah carefully, we discover that those first five books shared by Jews and Christians present these three siblings warts and all. Not all of the stories about them are heroic. Some of them present us with flawed human beings whose examples we follow at our own risk. But these stories also remind us that God works God's will through even the most broken vessels.

To hearken back to the first Advent theme, that of hope, which Pastor Stephen preached on so beautifully last week, these heroes with feet of clay give me hope when I consider that if God used them, perhaps I, too, can be a useful servant to the Beloved Community. But my topic for today is peace and this reading is set for today in Timothy Slemmons' Year D lectionary to be considered against that backdrop. How do the actions of Aaron and Moses in this story and the memory of their recently departed sister Miriam contribute to the peace of their community? How do they detract from it? And what does this story of a group of nomads in the deserts just outside the Promised Land have to teach us in this green and pleasant land some three thousand years later?

Let's begin with the context of our story as we find it in the Book of Numbers. First of all, you are hardly to be faulted if that context doesn't leap immediately to your mind. Wedged in between the rather dreary reading of Leviticus, a book of regulations guiding religious life for the ancient Hebrews, and Deuteronomy, a recap of the laws of God written as a warning speech from Moses just before his death, Numbers suffers from what seems like a story that goes around in circles, as indeed the Israelites did for forty years, and the insertion of yet more religious regulations that seem to have very little to do with either modern Judaism or Christianity. But there is some real meat on those seemingly dry bones and maybe sometime in the future we will impose on our resident Old Testament scholar to help us learn how to interpret Numbers to our spiritual profit. For my purposes this morning, however, let me quote from another great Old Testament scholar, the Paulist Father Lawrence Boadt. Boadt's Reading the Old Testament was required reading when I was a seminarian; somehow, I doubt that his work is in much demand at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary these days. Of the Book of Numbers, Boadt writes, "Numbers 11-20 is one series of murmurings after another."

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“Murmuring” is the relatively polite word used in many translations of the Old Testament to describe the nearly incessant complaining of the Children of Israel in their journeys between freedom from slavery in Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land. Their descendants today, at least those with a smattering of Yiddish, might call it kvetching. Grumbling would be another good translation or, according to Roget’s: groaning, growling, grouching, lamenting, wailing, complaining, moaning, whining... you get the idea. It’s hard to read Numbers and not be impressed with the sheer intestinal fortitude of Moses, putting up with this behavior for forty-plus years. Of course, to be fair, it’s also hard to read the story of the desert wanderings and not have at least a little sympathy for the folks who saw their arrival in their new home put off again and again and again.

A more specific context for this story comes from the first verse: “The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.” The account of Miriam’s demise seems almost a throw-away but we do well to pause and think about what it would have meant at the time. The generation that had fled the Egyptians would be nearly gone. Children and grandchildren would have been born who’d known nothing but wandering their whole lives. Miriam was a recognized leader of the people along with her brothers. Now, everyone’s sister, mother, grandmother, auntie, was dead and buried. There would have been the normal grieving but also the deep sense of loss that comes with the death of a leader in a community. Even a thousand years later, the prophet Micah remembered Miriam’s place in history: “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” And while the people grieved the loss of their matriarch, Moses and Aaron would have been grieving the loss of their dear sister. Siblings don’t always see eye-to-eye and these three had their differences over the years. But neither does one lose a sibling and not feel one’s own mortality pretty deeply.

And so, Moses, Aaron, and the people who followed them must have been on shaky emotional ground when the water ran out in Kadesh. Ironically, this had happened to them before at this place or nearby, as recounted in Exodus 17. As they had done the first time, Moses and Aaron seek the will of the Lord in the tent of meeting. But what God tells Moses to do is a little different. In the Exodus story, God tells Moses to take the staff he’d used to strike the Nile to turn it to blood and to strike a nearby rock, which would then gush water. This time, God instructs Moses to “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water.” The narrative continues, “So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as God had commanded him.” There’s a subtle difference here that’s easy to miss. Moses’ staff, which he had used at God’s command to produce so many miracles, is not meant here. “The staff... before the Lord” is Aaron’s staff, which has been left in the Tabernacle at God’s command. Numbers chapters 16-17 tell the story of a previous rebellion by the Israelites against Moses and, more specifically, Aaron as high priest. At the end of that rebellion, Aaron’s rod is made to blossom to confirm his special place among the people and that rod is laid before the Ark of the Covenant as a memorial of the event. It is this rod that God commands the brothers to show the people, presumably to remind the grumblers of God’s special blessing upon Aaron. They are to display the token of their blessing by God and to command the water. Nothing else.

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But Moses, worn out after 40 years of guiding a rebellious flock, grieving the death of the sister who saved his life, cannot resist giving vent to his anger. “Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.’”

Shortly after I was baptized in the spring of 1970 at the age of nine, a traveling Bible salesman visited our little Southern Baptist mission church on Long Island and my dad ordered me a fine leather-bound, gold-rimmed, King James Version, Scofield Reference Bible, which still sits at my desk at home. In those days in that tradition, it was considered *de rigueur* for Christians to read the Bible through once a year and I immediately set out on that literary journey. I remember being puzzled by this story. Why on earth was God punishing Moses for doing the same thing he’d done before? I’m a more informed and careful reader now and I think I understand. For one thing, Moses disrespected God by not following God’s instructions and by taking credit for himself and Aaron for a miracle that God was performing – “shall *we* bring water for you out of this rock?” But perhaps more importantly, Moses failed in his leadership of God’s people by venting his anger at them when what they really needed were words of peace. The people were grieving and frightened and Moses failed to comfort them.

If there is a single greatest threat to peace, to the true, holistic shalom of God, it may well be anger. The Bible is full of warnings about anger, from the earliest stories to the final vision. In Genesis 4, when Cain is angry that Abel’s sacrifice is better received than his own, God asks him, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you (may) master it.” And in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22, among the list of those who cannot enter, he includes murderers. Surely we are to be reminded of the anger of Cain. There are other memorable verses as well, from Proverbs (“A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.”), from the Psalms (“Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.”), from the teaching of Jesus (“if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”), and from those of his brother James (“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”) These are just a few of the Bible’s warnings against the great enemy of the peace we all crave.

Those warnings, of course, are for us all, and the story of Moses and his anger this morning is for us all, too. Moses’ sin was particularly egregious because it was committed against people who looked to him to be what Saint Francis later called “an instrument of God’s peace.” But you don’t have to be the leader of a nation to be looked to as a leader of peace. Perhaps, you are the leader of a team of co-workers or of fellow students. They look to you to be an instrument of peace, whether they would phrase it that way or not. Perhaps your neighbors or your barista or the checkout clerk at your grocery store know you are a Christian. They look to you to be an instrument of peace, whether they realize it or not. Most of us here are blessed to be parents or grandparents, aunts or uncles. The young folk look up to us, in part, to be instruments of peace.

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When we allow our anger, justified or not, to guide our relationship in any of these scenarios, we fail to be instruments of peace and we hurt those who look to us to fill that role.

As many of you know, I speak with some authority on this matter. For decades, one of my ongoing struggles has been to control my sometimes volcanic temper. I have too often excused myself on grounds of genetics and family history. “You’ve got to expect it with my red hair,” I used to say, although my hair hasn’t been red for quite some time now. I’ve told stories about my Papa Troy, who quit drinking in the wake of a bar fight during which he donned a set of brass knuckles and put a man’s eye out, or my dad, who was well-known for excoriating subordinates in public, or even my sweet mother, whose temper erupted seldom but with notable ferocity. My long-standing pal, Kathi Kern Luljak, has noted of my family’s days at Kirkwood Baptist Church, “Everybody knew not to mess with Bonnie Boyer.” And in recent years, I’ve had the scapegoat of my diabetes and swinging blood sugar. The new portmanteau word “hangry” became famous in commercials for Snickers but it was coined, I think, for those of us with blood sugar issues. But really, these are all pretty lame excuses for some pretty destructive behavior. There have been times that I, like Moses, have failed quite dramatically in my responsibilities toward you, my Beloved Community, because of uncontrolled anger. And I want you to know that I feel that deeply and apologize from the depths of my heart and pledge before you all that, with God as my helper, I will do better.

Now, let me turn, finally, to the end of this story. It’s a little hard to say what Aaron did to be included in the punishment God gives to Moses of not being able to enter the Promised Land. Perhaps he egged his younger brother on to lash out against the people. Perhaps he simply didn’t do enough to restrain him. It may be that God is taking account of Aaron’s earlier poor leadership during the incident of the Golden Calf. At any rate, Aaron is told that his time is at an end and goes to the top of the nearby mountain to pass on the regalia of his office to his son, Eleazar, and to die. Some of the commentators that I read on this passage suggest that the lesson here is that no one is irreplaceable, that God’s plans for God’s people include succession planning, and that the future of God’s people is secured. Those are good lessons but I’d like to suggest another. In the face of his own death, there is no protest from Aaron, no grumbling, no murmuring, no kvetching. Instead, he goes quietly, perhaps even joyously to his end, ready to pass the burden of leadership as well as its glory to his son. Aaron, it seems to me, is a perfect example of a prayer that I have often borrowed from our Anglican sisters and brothers and their Book of Common Prayer: “May the Lord grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.” Or, as our Catholic brothers and sisters say, “May the Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death.” One could say of Aaron, perhaps, in view of his sins, as Shakespeare had Malcolm say of the Thane of Cawdor in that Scottish Play, “nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it.” But for us, the goal is not simply a good death but a good life before, life as God intended, life as Jesus exemplified; a life given to our co-creation and building up of the Beloved Community. May God make us all instruments of God’s peace. Amen.