

“The Spiritual Practice of Heroism”

Exodus 14:5-21

August 9, 2020

When the Pharaoh of Egypt was told that the people were gone, he and his servants changed their minds. They said, “What have we done, letting Israel, our slave labor, go free?” So, he had his chariots harnessed up and got his army together. He took six hundred of his best chariots, with the rest of the Egyptian chariots and their drivers coming along.

GOD made Pharaoh, king of Egypt, stubborn, determined to chase the Israelites as they walked out on him without even looking back. The Egyptians gave chase and caught up with them where they had made camp by the sea—all Pharaoh’s horse-drawn chariots and their riders, all his foot soldiers there.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up and saw them—Egyptians! Coming at them! They were totally afraid. They cried out in terror to GOD. They told Moses, “Weren’t the cemeteries large enough in Egypt so that you had to take us out here in the wilderness to die? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Back in Egypt didn’t we tell you this would happen? Didn’t we tell you, ‘Leave us alone here in Egypt—we’re better off as slaves in Egypt than as corpses in the wilderness.’”

Moses spoke to the people: “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm and watch GOD do his work of salvation for you today. Take a good look at the Egyptians today for you’re never going to see them again. GOD will fight the battle for you.

And you? You keep your mouths shut!”

GOD said to Moses: “Why cry out to me? Speak to the Israelites. Order them to get moving. Hold your staff high and stretch your hand out over the sea: Split the sea! The Israelites will walk through the sea on dry ground.

“Meanwhile I’ll make sure the Egyptians keep up their stubborn chase—I’ll use Pharaoh and his entire army, his chariots and horsemen, to put my Glory on display so that the Egyptians will realize that I am GOD.”

The angel of God that had been leading the camp of Israel now shifted and got behind them. And the Pillar of Cloud that had been in front also shifted to the rear. The Cloud was now between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. The Cloud enshrouded one camp in darkness and flooded the other with light. The two camps didn’t come near each other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and GOD, with a terrific east wind all night long, made the sea go back. He made the sea dry ground. The seawaters split.

(Video-Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea in “The Ten Commandments”)

Charlton Heston, in the 1956 classic, “The Ten Commandments,” IS the quintessential Moses of my childhood. I suspect that if you were born before or around this date, you grew up with Cecil B. DeMille’s vision of what Moses, hero of the Hebrew people, was like.

Note the strong features of the protagonist: finely-toned muscles, dazzling red cloak, perfectly flowing gray hair and beard. He is tall, lean and commanding—everything we want our heroes to be. This is Moses. Moses needs to be larger than life, because God is busy commanding big bang miracles in the world through him. God, in the Hebrew stories, does not “play small.”

In the Old Testament—the Hebrew Bible—we are used to experiencing God in sweeping, universal majesty:

Genesis 1: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light’; and there was light.”

Genesis 1 continues: “Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

God of the Old Testament actively commands his creation. We were likely raised in 20th Century America to think of Charlton Heston’s “Moses” as an extension of what God looks like. Genesis is full of cinema house screen stories displaying God’s enormous power and hands-on control over the events of the ancient world:

The Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve;

The Great Flood and Noah, the rainbow a symbol of reconciliation;

The Destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah, as God is once again forgotten by the people and God again acts out of Divine Anger;

The Dream sent to the boy, Joseph, raised up by God as the next great Hebrew hero;

And then we get to Moses and the book of Exodus.

I asked Jan to read to you today the *fantastic* story from Exodus of how God uses Moses to part the enormous, raging Red Sea, thereby freeing the captive Israelites from the evil grip of Rameses, Pharaoh of Egypt. It took a BIG hero, a

hero larger than life, confident beyond measure, to pull off that stunt. God and Moses, Moses and God—it was an unbeatable team and just what the oppressed people of God needed at the time the stories were told.

But was Moses born a hero? Did he know from his little boy years that he would grow up to be the eventual icon of an entire faith tradition—Judaism, and the first superhero of our two-testament Bible? The scriptures suggest otherwise:

God appears to the young man Moses in a burning bush. Now this bush, we are told, is no little one sitting forgotten by the side of the road in a nondescript desert somewhere. Moses, a shepherd, is drawn to *magnificent* Mt. Horeb, the “MOUNTAIN OF GOD,” where an angel of the Lord beckons to him to draw near. God announces to Moses the breadth and depth of God’s history with the young man’s forebearers: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” God calls Moses to take up the hero’s mantle, to be God’s hands and feet in the world. He will go to Pharaoh and tell him, “Let my people go!”

But Moses doesn’t see himself as any sort of hero. He balks repeatedly at the suggestion that he can do this thing that God commands of him. “Who am I,” he protests, “that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God has to work *really hard* to get Moses to accept his commission! God performs miracles for Moses right there on the spot to show off divine powers, but even this demonstration does not convince the young and inexperienced shepherd to put his life on the line confronting the evil Ramses.

“O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. O my Lord, please send someone else!”

God loses patience with Moses, capitulating that his brother, Aaron, can speak in his place before the people, using words that God will feed him through Moses. It's a rather complicated proposition, not at all hero-like.

"Moses" is the nickname name given to the undisclosed person who in 1850 is raiding Southern plantations and freeing slaves. Whoever Moses is, he seems to fear nothing. He appears on farms and plantations in the middle of the night, convincing slaves to follow him to freedom. He defies all odds of getting caught. If captured, the end will not be pretty; Moses will surely be made an example of by the slaveowners who will torture and publicly execute him.

The slaveowners are as ground-in as Pharaoh was in his day; their wealth and livelihood depend almost entirely on their enslaved labor. They are not about to free those in their bondage, for to do so will signal the end of their economic survival and cultural norms. The bounty for the head of Moses keeps gaining momentum, attracting greedy hunters, white *and* black, to try their hand at snaring the one who threatens the very social fabric of the South.

Little do they know that "Moses" is a *woman*, not the man or gang they have been imagining, a *young* girl at that, barely standing 5 feet tall. She has no previous training in survival skills, can neither read nor write, and she lacks a cache of weapons, horses, or other supplies. She has one weapon- a knife, later a pistol, and a big inspiration. She wants herself and her family to be free.

God speaks to Arminta Ross— "Minty"—in dreams and spells, showing her the future, warning her of danger, pointing out the way through danger to safety, assuring her that she did not work alone, even though she is meant to do God's bidding mostly on her own.

And she has a few angels:

Rev. Samuel Green, who publicly supports the institution of slavery, but is really a secret agent for the Underground Railroad, a committee of both blacks

and whites seeking to find and free slaves. “Fear is your enemy;” he counsels her, “trust in God.” He warns her that she has “about a hare’s chance in a fox grove” of evading capture, but if determined to make a run for freedom, she should follow the North Star and the river to Pennsylvania;

Black Boatsmen wrap her in a towel after she nearly dies in the river and direct her on her way. Later, they haul freed enslaved people up the Delaware River to safety;

Thomas Garrett, a Quaker who hides her in his wagon and takes her to the Pennsylvania border, where she literally jumps across the state line to freedom;

William Still of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society who finds her a safe place to live and provides her with resources and a connection to Marie Buchanon, a free black woman who teaches her how to live in white society.

In a particularly powerful exchange between the two women, Minty—now taking her Free Name, Harriet Tubman—describes her relationship with God:

Marie: You say that God’s voice guides you. What’s that like?

Harriett: Sometime it sting. Like a smack in the face. Other time it’s soft. Like a dream. Fly off soon as you woke. Seem like I learned to see and hear God like some learn to read a book. I put all my attention on it. Act without question. Fore I can wonder, if I even heard it at all. Fore I can understand what it mean. I thought God wanted me to go get my husband. John was just a way to steer me to where I was needed.

Harriet Tubman is a hero. She lead her raids, back and forth, north as far as Canada to South and back again continuously from 1850- 1860 and the start of the Civil War, bringing her family and then scores of others out of their enslavement to their freedom.

Then she joins the Union war effort. On June 2, 1863, Harriet, under the command of Union Colonel James Montgomery, becomes the first woman to lead a major military operation in the United States when she and 150 African

American Union soldiers rescue more than 750 slaves in the Combahee Ferry Raid in South Carolina.

Harriett was a hero for others, but first, FIRST, she had to be a hero for herself. She was aptly known as “Moses,” not only for leading her people out of their bondage but also because just like the Israelite-would-be-unlikely-hero, she had no special attributes that qualified her for the job. She was simple, unskilled, ill-suited, and afraid. She ran. She ran from her master to avoid being “sold down the river.” (Have you ever heard that phrase before? Well it comes out of the annals of the scourge that was American slavery, where unwanted, unruly, or particularly valuable enslaved people were literally sold down the river to slaveowners deep in the South.)

She ran to avoid being caught, hobbled, beaten, or even killed. She followed the North Star, as Rev. Green told her, survived a jump from a high bridge into a raging river, caught muskrats with her bare hands for food, and took chances on strangers who helped her, but who could just as easily turned her in and collected a reward, all because God told her to do so. Deeply spiritual and faithful, Harriett learned to rely on the messages given to her in dreams and visions which started after she was clubbed in the head while enslaved.

Once she freed herself, she didn't hesitate. She had to go back for her people. She knew God would be with her the whole way. When she freed several enslaved people, she led them to the water, to the river that looked impassable. Her faith caused her to wade in. Her destiny caused her not to drown, but instead, to show them the way to safety, hounds, and gunmen right on their heels. Hence, she was dubbed, “Moses” in stories of the day.

This is the message Moses and Harriett. We have to be our own hero before we can be the hero for others. We don't need superpower skills-God will provide those; we just need to listen and follow the Spirit's call to action. Moses

was a commoner; Harriett was not even considered a full human being by her captors.

But where is God of our ancient stories? Where is the Cecil B. DeMille of Creation, God who moves mountains and parts vast, angry seas? Where do we find God who sets the plagues on Pharaoh, floods the entire earth, but saves just enough of human and animal kind to start over, God who raises up prophets and kings? Once the New Testament comes into being, God seems to be demoted to Best Supporting Actor to the star of the Gospels, Jesus, and by the end of the New Testament's epistles, God is reduced to a bit player in the faith docudrama. By Paul's reckoning as well as other early evangelists, Jesus and not God is the character who has the power to save, the power to transform the world, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

I find this troubling, even though I am Christian. Right about now, The Big Bang God would be welcome to come and wipe out Covid-19, to fix the social ills of our country, to call up a hero undisputed who could stand before Pharaoh and command, "Let my people go!"

I am decidedly Christian, but I need God's bigness. I need definition, not innuendo, not division, not unbelief. I needed this week the powerful witness of Harriett Tubman. I hope you found her enlightening and inspiring also. If you haven't studied her before now, I hope you do so soon. As Martha Sprague texted me after she and her extended family watched the film about her life together, "Another wonderful movie, in fact, the BEST."

Be the hero of your own story. You have a unique opportunity in these stay-at-home times. I quit eating junk food and drinking diet sodas (I know, I've said this before) and in so doing, have lost 20 pounds so far. I decided to stop being down in the dumps about what I couldn't do and instead to be the hero of

my own story. I feel so much better now that I am eating healthy food and only 1200 calories a day, knowing now that's really all I need.

Where can you be your own hero? Where in your body do you need healing? Do you need to get your mind around some woundedness in your history you have been avoiding? Do you need to get your heart right about someone you have been at odds with and written off as not worth your effort? Do you need to tend to your gut and rid it of toxins, fears, and unhealthy habits? Or do you need to find your feet again, get out and walk the neighborhood or exercise your muscles some other way? Perhaps you need to connect with your voice and speak a truth that you have been suppressing either within yourself or in the presence of others. Now is your time, and now you might just have the time to commit to your path and stick to it. That's my hope, anyway!

"God doesn't need you to play small." Those words written by Marianne Williamson were never truer. Be your own hero. Listen for God's call on your life and trust what you hear. Free others once you free yourself. You might be the one holding others in bondage for their past mistakes, misunderstandings, and misfires. You'll never know your strength and you'll never fully trust God until you get to the water's edge and step into the murky waters of the river of life and faith.

May It Be So.

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