



**“Taking Action: Confronting Pharaoh and Suffering the Backlash”**

**Scripture – Exodus 5**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, October 30, 2016**

We continue our reflection on the story of Moses and what it reveals about the life of faith. The first Sunday we looked at Moses encountering God in the form of a burning bush – a metaphor of God’s burning desire for justice. Moses discerned God summoning him to return to Egypt to liberate his fellow Hebrews. The passage prompted us to contemplate the ways God calls each of us.

The second sermon in the series focused on the way Moses *responded* to God’s call. He was anything but heroic. He whined. He tried everything he could imagine to reject God’s summons. We used that as a springboard to consider how we respond to God’s whispers – sometimes with excuses and doubting our abilities. However, like Moses, when we embrace God’s call, we become our fullest and truest selves.

Today, we track Moses on his return to Egypt where he seeks to be true to his mission and we discover that being faithful neither makes life easier nor guarantees success. Once Moses and his brother, Aaron, reach Egypt, they approach Pharaoh pleading, “Our God says, ‘Let my people go.’”

They have no doubt that Pharaoh will turn a deaf ear to two Hebrews hoping to liberate their people, but if they appeal to a higher authority – the God of Israel – perhaps old Pharaoh will let their people go.

No such luck. Pharaoh knows nothing of their god and is not about to divest himself of his slave labor force.

Undaunted, Moses and Aaron make a second appeal. “Our God spoke to us and we need to journey into the wilderness to worship our Lord.”

“Well, of course!” Pharaoh says, “Take all the time you need. I hope the taskmasters haven’t been pushing your people too strenuously.” Hardly. Pharaoh’s eyes squint and his teeth clench. “Are you kidding? Why would I give your people a holiday? Get back to work!”

Pharaoh’s fury intensifies at this bid for freedom and he commands the taskmasters to ratchet up the pressure. “No longer provide them with straw to make their bricks. Let them find their own straw, but require them to meet the same daily quota. They fancy themselves breathing the air of freedom. Smother them with work!”

The slave drivers impose impossible demands and when the Hebrews cannot produce the same daily quantity of bricks, the taskmasters beat the Hebrew foremen. The foremen appeal to Pharaoh, but he says, “This is what you deserve for asking me to give you time off to worship your god.”

As they leave Pharaoh, they meet Moses and Aaron whose actions prompted the crack down. Glaring at Moses and Aaron, they shout “May God judge you for what you have done. You have kindled the ire of Pharaoh and handed him a weapon to finish us off.”

Moses turns to God, “Why do you allow your people to be mistreated? Why did you ever send me?”

Although the word faith appears nowhere in this text, faith is the core issue. Will Moses continue to stick with God and pursue God’s mission when troubles arise?

Unfortunately, most of us were taught that faith is essentially believing certain religious tenets. Faith is not primarily focused on believing certain ideas *about* God, but rather putting trust *in* God. If a mother says she has faith in her son, she is not saying that she believes certain ideas about him; she is saying she trusts him. Faith in God is trusting God.

Further, faith is not primarily expressed with words, but actions. God beckons us to live a particular way – to love one another, to forgive, to return good for evil, to provide a meal to people who are hungry, to visit people who are ill or lonely, to provide housing for people without shelter, to roll out the welcome mat to strangers, and to be tenacious in the pursuit of justice.

Faith assures us that we are beloved children who have a purpose grander than our personal needs and desires. Faith assures us that if we wake up to the needs that cry out to us, we can discover in our depths, the courage to do what God summons us to do.

The story of Moses liberating the Hebrews has often been told in terms of inevitability. That is, Moses and Pharaoh were mere pawns in God’s scheme. Many will say it was a forgone conclusion that God would break the chains of slavery and the Hebrew people would go free. I respectfully dissent.

Does God predetermine the events of history or does God give us freedom to act as we choose? Surely we have freedom. Otherwise, there would not be so much violence, abuse and suffering. God is always on the side of justice and compassion, and never tires from urging individuals to do what is right, but God does not manipulate people to force outcomes.

Some think that their religious duty is to pray for God to set the world right. Isn’t that a bit arrogant? Do we really imagine that God is waiting for us to tell God what to do? As if God will smack the divine forehead and say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” We do not ask God to set the world right; God summons *us* to make it right. As one theologian put it, “Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.”<sup>1</sup>

God heard the cries of the Hebrew people who were being held captive. God despises suffering and loves freedom, but God did not unilaterally set them free. God called Moses to lead the liberation effort and it proved to be a formidable struggle.

In my mind, Moses’ mission was not a guaranteed success. When Pharaoh rebuffed Moses and worsened the plight of the slaves, Moses could have given up his quest. He never wanted the job in the first place because he knew it was a dangerous mission and the odds were piled high against him.

The teller of this saga describes a reluctant Moses who questions his ability to perform God's mission. How often do we find ourselves in the sandals of Moses? Facing a need, but reluctant to tackle it. The challenge before us appears too immense to wrap our arms and minds around so we name the reasons why we are not the right person. Surely there is someone more qualified than I; someone wiser; someone more experienced; someone possessing more courage.

Overcoming injustice is rarely easy. Standing up for what is right – not right in terms of personal self-interest, but right in God's eyes – is a challenge. Someone is benefiting from the injustice and will not give up without a fight.

The story of Moses reminds us that living our faith is not for the faint-hearted. It requires courage.

Did you know that there are more than 300 passages in the Bible that refer to fear? Almost every time messengers from God appear in the gospels, they speak the same words: "Do not be afraid."

Fear can arouse us to impending danger, but fear can also cripple us. Neuroscience links fear to a particular part of the brain that scouts for danger, and upon detecting it, sounds the alarm. It floods the brain with a chemical that rivets our attention on the object that frightens us. However, we can become so focused on the perceived danger that we lose the ability to think straight. We can lose the ability to envision anything other than the identified threat.<sup>2</sup> Courage can help us look beyond the current terror to the possibilities of a positive outcome.

Had Moses been crippled by fear, he never would have confronted Pharaoh and freed the Hebrew slaves. His faith in God stiffened his backbone and generated more courage than he ever imagined. He was able to confront Pharaoh and not back down.

Did you know it took nearly 100 years of protests and activism for women to win the right to vote? Women were slandered, imprisoned, and beaten for having the courage to defy the Pharaohs who were determined to prevent them from going to the polls.

There is no telling how many people were whipped and killed in the struggle to abolish slavery in this country because of the Pharaohs who kept human beings in shackles.

It was a struggle to secure child labor laws because there were Pharaohs who demanded cheap labor.

Followers of Gandhi were persecuted and killed because they had the courage to stand tall while receiving blows from the Pharaohs who occupied their country.

In Gandhi's analysis of the struggle against injustice, he was paraphrased to say: "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, then you win." Gandhi knew what people of faith must know: if you are on the side of justice – which is God's side – eventually right will overcome wrong.

Much in our world is good and beautiful, but much is also dark and broken. Courage allows us to set aside our self-interest and do what God has shown us is right.

Could God be summoning you through one of the voices crying for help?

- Residents of crime-ridden neighborhoods cry out for an end to the violence.
- People with addictions cry out for assistance.
- Children in dysfunctional homes cry out for mentors.
- People who have served time cry out for a second chance.
- Lonely people in nursing homes cry out for a friend.
- People in grief cry out for someone who will listen.
- Refugees cry out for a safe haven.

Tapping into God's Spirit within us, we can discover the courage to stand up to whatever Pharaohs we encounter. We need not wait for justice, it is a river running deep within us.

## NOTES

1. William Sloane Coffin
2. Peter L. Steinke, "Fear Factor," *The Christian Century*, February 20, 2007.