

Exodus 4

This chapter is comprised of negotiations, introductions, and rededications. We will begin with the negotiations. We might assume that if the God of our ancestors appeared to us in a burning bush, we should probably listen and obey; listen to God and obey the task that is set before us, regardless of how difficult that task appears to be. This is not, however what Moses does. Moses is unsure of his ability to carry out the task. As Moses listens to God, Moses' inability to get two Hebrew slaves to listen to him, hardly gives him confidence in his ability to get Pharaoh, a demi-god with incredible power, to listen to a Midianite/Hebrew shepherd. So, Moses makes a reasonable point that no one will listen to him. Thus, the negotiations begin.

God's response is not one of anger but of understanding. Moses does not believe his words will convince anyone, so God offers him two phenomena with which to impress the people of Israel. The first is a magic staff that can become a snake and then return to its original form. However, it will only return to its original form if Moses grabs it by the tail which is the most dangerous way to pick up a snake. When we watch Moses pick the snake up by its head, we know that the negotiations are proceeding. God then adds a second miracle to Moses' arsenal, the changing of Moses hand from healthy to sickly. Finally, if neither of those signs work God adds an even more impressive sign, that of turning water into blood. Moses is still not convinced and returns to the issue of speech, claiming to never have been eloquent. Again, God does not become angry. God understands Moses' hesitancy and so assures the future liberator that God will be with Moses' mouth, teaching him what to say.

It is at this juncture that negotiations almost fail because Moses mocks God. Moses mocks God, who has declared God's name to be "I am who I am", with a response to God's offers of "You send who you will send" meaning I don't care who you are, send someone else. At this point God becomes angry, but relents, by introducing Aaron, Moses' brother, to us, and perhaps to Moses, to go with him. This offer at last satisfies Moses. He will have magic and a mouthpiece with which to convince the Israelites and the Pharaoh. In addition, he will have someone, Aaron, to introduce him to his long-lost family, who neither knows nor trusts him. Negotiations and introductions are complete. Moses takes up his staff, says good by to Jethro, collects his family and heads for Egypt only to be told on his way out that God will harden Pharaoh's heart and kill Pharaoh's first-born son.

Now for the rededication. The story of God desiring to kill Moses as Moses and his family leave town is the most enigmatic event in Exodus. Over the centuries commentators have argued about the true meaning of the story. I will offer only one perspective. The story makes clear that Moses' son has not been circumcised. What this means is that Moses has not initiated his son into the covenant community or, to put it another way, has not fully agreed to be part of God's people. This is, as the old Westerns put it, "a hanging offense." Even Zipporah, the Midianite, understands this and immediately circumcises her son and touches the blood to Moses feet (testicles) as an act of propitiation to God.

The chapter concludes with Moses family returning home (they sense the danger of this mission), Aaron and Moses having a happy reunion (odd for brothers) and the people believing that God had sent the two brothers to set them free; all of which will set Moses, Aaron and Israel up for disappointment.

Reflection: One of the great hymns of our faith is Trust and Obey. It sums up that when God says "jump", we are to ask, "how high." Yet in this story God does not seem bothered that Moses negotiates. Perhaps this is because God understands that Moses is, like you and me, a fearful human being. That we are men and women who do not always trust in our abilities to do what God asks of us. That we are men and women who feel more confident when we work together to accomplish God's will for us and for the world. So God works with us to help us discover just how much we can do with God's help.

Questions:

1. Has there been a time when you "negotiated" with God? What was that like?
2. Who has God sent to you that supported you on your journey of faith?
3. When have you felt called by God to a particular mission or ministry? What was that like?