

But Moses

Exodus 3, 4, selected verses

When you start your life out being strapped to a raft and plunked into a fast-moving river in the hopes that someone will fish you out and give you a home, you are bound to develop a strong constitution.

When I picture Moses in my mind's eye, I don't see Charlton Heston, like a lot of you do. I see Grizzly Adams. Yes, I know that he was raised in Pharaoh's household and probably didn't do an honest day's work for the first 20 years or so of his life, and had manicured nails and French lessons, but I still see him as the sort of guy who could snatch a salmon out of the rapids with his bare hands and send a coyote slinking off into the brush with nothing more than his cold, hard stare. He had to be a pretty tough guy to stand up to that Egyptian, presumably killing him and burying him in the sand with his bare hands. He must have been rugged and resourceful to have survived in the wilderness, and made it in the dangerous world of shepherding. But most of all, he had to have been one fearless man to stand in front of a burning-but-not-burning bush and have a conversation with God.

Now, what you may not realize is that only part of his conversation with God was actually preserved and documented in Exodus. The first part of it was heavily edited by the narrator, I guess for space purposes. But here's how it went:

God: Moses, I've been watching and I've seen how awful the lives of my people in Egypt are, and I've heard them crying out in pain and I've heard the prayers they have prayed at night when they go home and beg for it all to end. I know how much they are suffering, and how bitter their lives are.

Moses: Yeah? We've all been wondering if you were paying any attention. So what are you going to do about it?

God: Well, I decided that I needed to come down here and set them free from the horrible cruelty they have endured. I'm going to get them out of Egypt, take them to a land where they will be free and live a good, long, happy life. It'll be just like the good old days in the garden.

Moses: Excellent! I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that because they really have had it rough. And I know I was raised in Pharaoh's house and all, but I'd just like to go on record as saying that I don't condone this at all, and in fact I even stopped one of the Egyptians myself from beating one of the Hebrew guest workers. Yup, I did. Stopped him 'dead' in his tracks. Let him know that no one was going to treat a Hebrew like that as long as ol' Moses was around!

God: Well Moses, I'm glad to hear you say that because I'm sending you to Pharaoh to tell him that you are taking his entire work force and leaving Egypt.

Moses: Um....I thought you said you had come down to do this yourself.

That was probably Moses' first ever failure of nerve. But to his credit he's not reduced to total drivel, obviously, because at this point his conversation with God turns into an argument. He is full of "buts". He gives God one reason after another for why God's plan isn't such a great one: But God, the Israelites won't trust me since they don't know me. They won't believe I've actually talked to you. But I'm a terrible public speaker; I get really nervous and can't spit my words out. I'll be a laughing stock and no one will take me seriously! The more assurances God gives him, the more desperate he gets, until finally he gets down to the honest truth: But, Lord, I just don't want to do this. Please send someone else!

Can you imagine how this conversation might have sounded if it had gone like most of our calls do when we need someone to teach Sunday School or drive the church van or cook for WNL? Hey, um Moses, I've got this great plan to get these poor Israelites out of Egypt and into a land of their very own, but I really could use a hand with it. It's really not a big deal but I need someone to go talk to Pharaoh, and then show the people the way out of here. Do you think you might help out? No? Pretty busy these days, huh? No, listen, I understand completely. Don't worry about it, I'll ask someone else.

Usually when we talk about this story of Moses and the burning bush we get so fired up about holy ground and Moses' call that we overlook the complete audacity of God's plan, and his brazenness in enlisting Moses. Moses may have been one gutsy guy, but he had nothing on God.

First of all, go back to that first part of God's speech – God hears, God sees, God knows all about the trials and tribulations of his people. It doesn't look like God has been seen or heard from in a few hundred years now, but here he is, intimately aware of their misery and helplessness. He has heard every cry and prayer and seen every beating they have received at the hand of the Egyptians. It's reminiscent of some of the language in the second and third chapters of Genesis. In the first chapter, God just speaks, snaps his fingers from on high, and Poof! the world is created. But in the second chapter God comes down and scoops up some dirt and shapes it into two people and breathes life into their nostrils, and then he takes a shovel and plants them a garden so they all have a place to hang out together!

This God is right there with us in the thick of things, hearing, seeing, and acutely feeling everything we go through – hunger pangs and cold lonely nights spent on a sidewalk heat vent and neglected children's longing for love and touch and a patient's frightening nights spent in the hospital. And not only that, God has a crazy, audacious, this-just-might-work plan to alleviate that suffering. Convince the king of Egypt that he has to let a couple million of his captive workforce go free, and then lead them a few hundred miles through the barren wilderness back to Canaan. Insane, isn't it? At least, for anyone but God.

There's just one hitch. Moses. You. Me. God knows, sees, hears, feels misery and suffering and hunger and humiliation, and God has a million crazy plans to do something about it, but God needs someone to carry those plans out. Have you ever thought about that? God needs us as much as we need God! Moses whines that he can't do it alone, but neither can God. God needs hands and feet and voices to make it work. God needs gentle souls to comfort and Grizzly Adams sorts to address injustice

and speak the hard truth to hard-hearted people. God needs worker bees to feed the hungry and dreamers to believe a different world is within our grasp. God can see and hear and plan, but God needs you to make that plan happen.

And you heard what God finally said to Moses: ENOUGH. He wasn't asking Moses if he would like to help, to be a part of the plan. He was telling Moses that he WAS sending him to Pharaoh. No excuse was good enough. I think we forget sometimes that God is sovereign over us. God's not in the business of asking us if we would mind, if we aren't too busy or don't have more important things to do, would we give him a few minutes of our time to help out. I think sometimes that one of the things we like most about being Christians is the freedom and free will to do whatever we want and then just ask forgiveness for it later. But I don't remember a single instance in scripture where God asks – he didn't ask Abraham if it was convenient for him to pick up and go, and if he was interested in being the father of a nation; he just told him to go and made a covenant with him. Gabriel didn't ask Mary how she would feel about being the mother of the Messiah and being known as the bad girl of Nazareth. He just told her what was about to happen to her. Jesus never said to the disciples that he had a really good thing going and they ought to join up. He just said, "Follow me." And they did.

If we look around the world and wonder why God allows all this suffering, guess what? Maybe it's because God has an audacious, insane plan to alleviate it, and we are all too full of "buts" to carry it out: but I'm too busy. But those people make me uncomfortable. But I don't know what to say to someone who's dying. But I don't have enough money to help. But they live on the other side of the world. But I don't know any people like that. But if I get involved they'll just want more. But that life is too hard. But I just don't want to. Maybe there is still suffering in the world because we haven't done what God has told us to do.

And how do you know what God has told you to do (and notice I didn't say "if" God has told you to do something)? Chances are God has not appeared to you in a burning bush. What is more likely is that deep inside of you, even deeper than the feeling of being overwhelmed by your life, or being afraid of getting involved, or being uncomfortable when you are out of your element, is an even deeper feeling. A feeling of compassion for people who have lost everything, or outrage at the injustices of the world, or joy in being with children, or restlessness with your own life. Or maybe the way you know that God has given you something to do is by a phone call that comes out of the blue asking you to do something you never thought about or wanted to do, but a gentle, insistent nudging tells you it's right. You hear about people who say that God has "given them a heart" for people in Africa, or working and living with the homeless in the inner city, and we tell ourselves that they are a special breed, cut out of a different kind of cloth than regular, run-of-the-mill Christians. But I don't think they are. God needs all of us to carry out his audacious plans. God expects all of us to do the work of God's kingdom – bringing peace and wholeness to the earth.

It takes a tough, gutsy person to hang around God, not in the "snatching fish out of the river with your bare hands" kind of way, but to say "yes" to God's crazy plans. They are insane. They are audacious. They are demanding. And they are life-giving. They are the plans of a God who hears people's cries and sees their sufferings, and has come down to take care of them. But not alone.