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Heirs of the Promise

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Exodus 2:23-3:15, 4:10-17

²³ After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

[Moses at the Burning Bush]

3 *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

⁷ Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

[The Divine Name Revealed]

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':"

This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

[chapter 4]

¹⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹ Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? ¹² Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." ¹³ But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else." ¹⁴ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶ He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷ Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

Twenty-two Bible chapters ago, Jacob was on the run from his brother Esau. He escaped, had twelve sons who tortured each other, and they all landed in Egypt to escape a famine. The descendants of those twelve sons ended up enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, during which the promise of God – made to their ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – fell out of their memory. Eventually the king of Egypt, the Pharaoh, decided the Hebrew population was growing faster than he could feed it, so he ordered their baby boys be killed at birth. Infanticide.

A pair of midwives defied the Pharaoh and refused to kill the boys they delivered. One of those boys was named Moses. Brave as the midwives were, his mama was braver. She gave him away rather than risk an Egyptian soldier finishing him with a spear. Her plan was brilliant, and Moses grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh himself. They adopted him and he was their little pet Hebrew.

One day, and one day only, when Moses was grown but still a young man, *who he was born to be* flared up in him. He saw an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew kinsmen. It was as if the two parts of Moses himself, that were always inside him all the time, were before his eyes for one minute. And in that moment Moses was clear-eyed and brave and as true to his people as those midwives and his mother had been. He killed the Egyptian for beating his kinsman.

But Moses' first burst of courage didn't last. We know so by the way he buried the dead Egyptian in the sand. Hid him, hoping no one saw. Someone saw. He freed just one Hebrew from just one moment of suffering. So Moses ran away. The Pharaoh wanted him dead. (So much for being their pet.) So Moses ran away. This story can't move until someone runs away, don't you know!

He comes to a no-place place called Midian – across the Red Sea, interestingly, in what is now Saudi Arabia. He meets a priest named Jethro, the father of seven daughters, who gives him one of the daughters in marriage, Zipporah. They have an extremely weird marriage. You can read about it on your own time.

Eighteen thousand, six hundred days go by – forty years, that is. The Hebrews enslaved in Egypt suffered hugely, as enslaved people are prone to do. The work was menial and back-breaking. Exodus 3 says, *God heard their cries*. And the Hebrew baby born to die, adopted into privilege with access to the highest palace in the land, is now herding sheep in a foreign country. It is honorable work for the people who are called to do it. Biblically, it always is a metaphor. Biblical shepherds don't shepherd sheep and goats. They shepherd people. They shepherd people from hopelessness to joy, from suffering to salvation, from fear all the way to faith.

Sometime around Day 18,601, foreshadowing the greater leave-taking that God is about to usher in, Moses walks away from his flocks to investigate a mystery: a tree on fire but not at all burned up. Unbeknownst to Moses, he's come to the space called *worship*, the space where human meets divine directly. *Holy ground*, it's called. Shoes are not appropriate. Floors either. Nothing human-made between the ground and human feet. We come from that ground, and it all comes from God.

God has something to say about what God made. Things have gotten out of hand. Humans enslaving other humans is entirely out of hand, much too much beyond the pale of what God will now abide. The precedent is set down here, from within a burning bush. *Remember that one day, Moses? That day you knew exactly who you were? I need the Moses you were that day. I need that Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. My people, Moses. Your people. Your mama and daddy's people. Your aunts and your uncles and your cousins. The ones you try not to think about after all these years.*

Past what we would call retirement age, Moses is sitting on a nest egg of privilege. *Time to spend it, Buddy* – that's what I hear God saying, while Moses tries to convince God he really doesn't have anything at all. This is what privileged people do, you know. Pretend we aren't. Pretend that we can't. Claim we simply don't know how to do what needs to be done, when what needs doing is risky or scary – or just uncomfortable. Of course people can't help being privileged. Moses can no more help being privileged than his kinfolks can help being slaves. Except, of course, he has choices and they don't. And pretending he has fewer than he does makes him no less privileged. It just makes him self-indulgent – and a jerk.

And were this NOT the Bible story, Moses would be free to be a self-indulgent jerk who believed that all personal success is really just a matter of personal effort whether one is born to slaves or kings. But this IS the Bible story, with this divine promise embedded in these chosen people. And on this page, MOSES is the carrier of the promise for the

people – which means his life is not his own, any more than Abraham's was his, or Jacob's or Isaac's or Joseph's lives were theirs.

Moses was Hebrew by birth, Egyptian by adoption, Midianite by marriage. But below and before all that, he was God's choice to carry the promise to a new generation. And nowhere he could go was far enough to outrun that reality, and no excuse he could compose was going to change God's mind. *Not because of who your parents are or who you're married to, Moses, but because you are mine. Because I've chosen you. Because I will be with you all the way.*

I could be wrong, but when Moses heard the plan from the tree on fire, I'm guessing it wasn't a brand new idea to him. I'm guessing it was something he already thought about all the time. How the generation before him had taken great risks to save his baby butt from infanticide. And now here he was, hiding in the mountains of a foreign country across the sea, tending sheep. I have the idea that one day he felt compelled to do right by them, but didn't. Then felt really guilty the next day. And then the next day just ate lots of pasta and tried not to feel anything.

We know Moses felt something for his peoples' suffering – at least once. He killed a man over it. But his passion was pretty quickly tempered by a natural appreciation for his own skin. He was a helper, not an activist. He tells the Lord as much. *The Pharaoh won't listen to me*, he whines. *The Hebrews won't listen to me either*, he wails. God answers him patiently twice. Then in verse thirteen, Moses tells the truth: *"O my God, puhleeze send someone else!"* And the Bible says, *the Lord's anger was kindled against Moses.*

Can ya maybe see why? After all the breaks Moses has had, all the good fortune and the privilege, now God wants something from **him** and he cannot muster an ounce of the compassion or courage he once – ONCE – felt for his own kinsmen. As a Hebrew by birth, Egyptian by adoption and Midianite by marriage, Moses played each to its maximum advantage: he escaped infanticide, he grew up rich and privileged, he ended up safe, loved and set for life. But, before Moses knew he was Hebrew or Egyptian or Midianite, Moses was heir to the promise of God. All his other *markers* like Hebrew, Egyptian and Midianite were subject to his status as heir to the promise.

About ten years ago our alma mater, Arkansas State University, started a brilliant fundraising plan. They employ undergraduate work-study students in the development office, in the evenings, to call up alumni and to ask us for money. Not a lot – \$100, \$200. It's pretty easy money to raise, too. You know why? Because 85% of the students that graduate from ASU are first-generation college students. People like us owe our university more than we can pay back in our working lives. In seminary I knew a woman who always gave her parents presents on her own birthday. She said when she grew up she realized she owed them everything.

Friends, to *whom* do you owe *what*? – not because they have demanded payment, but because without them you would not have the life you have now? What privilege and access and advantage do we carry around in our personhood every day that we never asked for and never earned? And yet we get to choose upon what we shall spend it. Likewise, as with Moses, before and below all the other things we are in this life – before we are male or female or non-binary or trans; or white or peach or black or brown or ginger; or rich or poor or skinny or fat or gay or straight; or American or Asian or African; or any of the other markers we assign to ourselves and others – before and below all of them, we too are heirs of the promise of Christ. Apart from Christ, Friends, nothing matters, and in Christ, everything is subject to Him.

If our lives were not the Bible story, we would be free, of course, to be self-indulgent. But we are. We are the Bible story in this time and place; we are heirs to that same promise; we are as chosen and as called as Moses to carry the promise into another generation.

Would you pray with me?