

Going Through the Motions
Exodus 2:11-25
© Stacey Steck
Preached July 14, 2013 at San José, Costa Rica

There are very few chapters in the Bible in which God does not make an appearance, or doesn't rate a mention. The book of Esther is one of those, as well as the chapters in Genesis that tell the story of Joseph's time in Egypt. Everywhere else, God is either creating, talking, destroying, comforting, challenging, guiding, healing, or is being talked about as the one who has done those things or is doing them. But there are also notable occasions when God is conspicuously absent, or silent. Although that great sufferer and questioner Job calls upon God to speak for more than thirty chapters, God takes a leisurely amount of time before answering. Tonight's story is from the first two chapters of Exodus, one of these exceptions to the rule that a book about God must always have the main character in every scene, and so it raises the question, "Why is *that* in the Bible?"

Does it make a difference if the truth is that God was truly absent, rather than that the Israelites simply forgot about God? The first two chapters of Exodus seem to suggest either or both of these things may be true. On the one hand, no one, not even Moses, seems to remember that God had made some rather grand, and, as of yet, unfulfilled promises to their ancestor Abraham. No Israelite voices bewilderment that God would allow this awful slavery to continue unabated for centuries. When they do finally cry out under their burdens, they don't direct their

lament to God, but rather sort of generically to anyone who might be listening. God is no longer part of their story, except maybe in some sort of superstitious sense when it comes to the midwives fearing God enough to not follow Pharaoh's command to kill all the male children of the Hebrews. And this one mention of God in these chapters is rather telling actually for the other side of the story, that there is no divine action portrayed in these key moments in Israel's history. God doesn't tell those midwives to disobey Pharaoh. God doesn't advise Moses' mother and father in a dream to put him in a basket just when the princess will be bathing in the Nile. God doesn't direct Moses to slay the Egyptian, or send a prophet to tell him to allow Reuel's daughters to draw their water first before the shepherds. No, God is as silent about the Hebrews as they are about God. Our own experience tells us how easy it is for us human beings to forget about God, so we can accept the blame for God's absence during those brutal years. But given the complete lack of interest God seems to have taken for those very people for whom those promises were made, perhaps we must also consider the possibility that God really was taking a vacation.

One way to understand God's absence is that it simply was a matter of perception, that it just seemed that God was absent, awaiting the appropriate time to make an entrance, sort of like that famous "footprints in the sand" poem. Thus, we may see God's reemergence into Israel's life with the emergence of the right leaders, Moses and Aaron. In this light, we can see that God knows that although

Moses is the right man for the job, he is not ready to lead the Israelites out of Egypt until he grows up in mind and spirit, as well as body, until he can more fully identify with his own people, until he can lead without impulsive violence. So, then, Moses' time in Midian is his time of preparation, his time of solidarity to be used later for God's purposes, and God was simply abiding that time, waiting for the proper moment to set the burning bush, and the faith of the people of Israel, aflame.

The other way to understand God's absence is that it was a real absence. God was off creating another part of the Universe, or tending to other crises of salvation elsewhere, and so took a break from our Earth and its concerns, until the cries of the Hebrews once again reached the divine ears. Although this might sound terrible to our Jesus' tuned ears, from the perspective of the author of Exodus, this caused no great crisis of faith amongst the Hebrews because they had no real frame of reference that their God (if they even remembered they had a God) would intervene in history to do something about their situation. It had never really happened before, unless you count the flood, which really wasn't sent for their benefit. The coming exodus will be the first time God's people are really rescued, and made aware as a whole people that God has made them some pretty amazing promises. But on top of that lack of precedent, the absence was so long (four hundred years!) that even if there had been a faith in God, it had long since gone dormant. And with no one calling out for help, or offering sacrifices, perhaps God

figured everything was fine down there. We don't know what God was up to. And apparently, neither did the author of Exodus, because no explanation is given.

Of course, to contemplate the true absence of God is an extraordinary challenge for the Christian, who has been fed a steady diet of God's constant presence in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus assures his disciples, and us, that "I am with you until the end of the age." That's pretty specific and concrete. And if that weren't enough presence for you, remember that Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of John, that "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." Yes, we were raised believing that God is only a prayer or a heartbeat away, that the distance between heaven and earth has been bridged once and for all, that what happened in the time between Joseph and Moses could never happen again.

As I said before, it is easy to place the blame for God's absence on our own shoulders. Who are we, after all, to question God's faithfulness? Even if, in some corner of our hearts, we are inclined to believe that God really is absent, taking a break from our concerns and travails, we are still reluctant to give in to that belief because of what it might say about our faithfulness – that we have failed to trust fully in God. We want to give God the benefit of our doubt. But if we do decide that, yes, God is on vacation, we certainly wouldn't share that information with anyone else, for God only knows what people might say about us and our faith.

The dynamic has caused a great deal of anxiety for the faithful throughout the years, this tension between presence and absence, between knowing that you are trying your best, but God still isn't making an appearance, that terrible things are happening in your life and in the world, injustices are occurring about which God is on the record as being against, and yet God still isn't doing anything about it. And our human answers tend, as I said, toward giving God the benefit of the doubt, that any absence is just a matter of perception, and intentional, and maybe even to show us the error of our ways, to teach us a lesson. Madeleine L'Engle writes, "I have often been told that when one first turns to God, one is greeted with brilliant 'Yes' answers to prayers. For a long time that was true for me. But then, when he has you hooked, he starts to say 'No'. This has been, indeed, my experience. But it has been more than a 'No' answer lately; after all, 'No' is an answer. It is the silence, the withdrawal, which is so devastating. The world is difficult enough with God; without him it is a hideous joke." The way I hear her, for Madeleine L'Engle, the withdrawal and silence of God is just one more variation of the divine 'No', that God's hiding from her is intentional.

But the way I hear the beginning of the Exodus story is not that God has been hiding, has not been trying to use the divine absence to teach them something about the divine presence, or their faith. You see, Exodus doesn't say (where the rest of the Bible often does) that because Israel sinned, because they forgot God, God forgot them, or that the Hebrews were angry or mystified at God, or even, that

they blamed themselves. What I do hear in these chapters from Exodus is that even if God is truly absent, God will in the end, hear our cries and respond. But to add the burden of questioning our faithfulness on top of whatever other hardship we may be enduring is just too much. To paraphrase the same Madeleine L'Engle, "The world is difficult enough with God; blaming ourselves for God's absence is a hideous joke."

Because our faithfulness can't depend on either God's actual presence, or our perception of it, and because we can't really know the difference, I think it better to spare ourselves the angst of questioning our own faithfulness and to simply surrender to the fact that from time to time, we will experience differently the presence or absence of God. Renita Weems has written an autobiographical account of her struggles with this tension in a book called "Listening for God," and I want to read you one of the most poignant and honest sections. "One day I decided to surrender. After months, perhaps years, of pretending to feel something I didn't feel, I decided to confess to the deep freeze that for a long time had had me in its grip. I stopped scolding my heart because of my inability to pray as I once had. I stopped harassing my soul about my failure to feel God's presence when I prayed or listened to sacred music or stood in the pulpit to speak. And I stopped badgering God for a sign, a gesture, a sound, some indication that I hadn't lost my way, that I needn't walk away from years of ministry, preaching, counseling, teaching in a seminary, and writing what some term "inspirational" books. Slowly,

gradually, I began accepting the possibility that something inside me had changed. My soul no longer responded to the same spiritual stimuli. When finally I stopped flogging myself for the hollow feeling I'd been carrying around inside for months, I began to notice a pattern. After every high there came a spiritual low. After months of maturing in my prayer life and of feeling myself becoming increasingly sensitive to the nearness and presence of the divine in my surroundings, I noticed myself becoming spiritually listless and unable to muster any passion for the disciplines I'd undertaken to nurture the inward journey. It was as if I had slammed into a brick wall, spiritually speaking. Indeed, for as long as I could remember giving myself willingly, gladly over to a belief in mystery, I remembered experiencing periods when I was barely able to stand to hear my own prayers. And thinking back on it, I realized that this wasn't the first time something in me had shut down. The soul flourishes and withers scores of times in the face of the sublime."

The point to which Renita Weems eventually arrives is that life must go on even if some of the time God doesn't seem to be along for the journey. What matters for her is that we keep up our end of the bargain no matter where God is, or what God's motivations might be, that even in those dry, desert times, we go through the motions, that we keep praying, that we keep giving, that we keep caring. Even if we do them half-heartedly, even if we do them not remembering exactly why we are supposed to do them, it is important to do them. She recounts

one of the stories of the Baal Shem Tov (“master of God's name”) told by his followers, the Hasidim, a Jewish sect of Eastern Europe, which he founded around the middle of the eighteenth century and which lives on to this day.

Perceiving that he was dying, the Baal Shem Tov called for his disciples and said, “I have acted as intermediary for you, and now when I am gone you must do this for yourselves. You know the place in the forest where I call to God? Stand there in the place and do the same. Light a fire as you have been instructed to do, and say the prayer as you learned. Do all these and God will come.”

Shortly afterward, the Baal Shem Tov died. The first generation of followers did exactly as he had said, and sure enough, God came as always. After this generation passed, the second generation had forgotten how to light the fire the way the Baal Shem Tov had instructed. Nevertheless, they faithfully made the pilgrimage to the special place in the forest and said the prayer they had been instructed to pray. And sure enough, God showed up.

A third generation came along, who had forgotten how to light the fire and no longer remembered the place in the forest where they should stand. But they said the prayer as the Baal Shem Tov had instructed. And again God showed up.

By the fourth generation, no one was around who remembered how to light the fire or where the special place was in the forest. Neither was anyone alive who could recall the prayer the Baal Shem Tov had instructed his followers to pray. But

there was one person who remembered the story about the fire, the forest, and the prayer and delighted in telling it over and over. And sure enough, God came.

“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. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” Why is this story of God’s absence in the Bible? To keep us from beating ourselves up over God’s absence, but also to remind us to never give up crying out to our God, for even our absent God hears, remembers, looks upon us, and takes notice of us.

Amen.