

*The Path*, Chapter 5: Moses

10-15-17

Would you like to learn how to get in trouble? Believe it or not, I know how. I am not talking about the type of trouble you may be thinking of. Though as a little boy, I did get into more than my share. It may have been due to the red hair. From my experience, teachers tend to blame the redhead when she catches a group acting up. At least that's my story and I am sticking to it.

I want to talk about getting into a different type of trouble. The story of Moses-- and what it means for us today-- tells us about that special type of trouble. Now so far, in reading *The Path*, we have learned a lot of things about life and being human. We learned we are made in God's image—and like God, we can use language to create goodness. We learned we are sinners—that our sin comes when we hide from God; and that our hiding can lead to acts of violence. We learned that as descendants of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to all the nations of the world. And we learned life is complicated and often unjust; yet God continually works to bring good from evil like the story of Joseph.

This week we learned that the story of Joseph ended-- and a new chapter began. In the first verses of Exodus we hear "...a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." And that is when we begin to learn about how to get into trouble. You see, getting into trouble is not always because of something we do. It is not always a matter of misbehaving. Sometimes it is simply a matter of being. In Moses case, he was born into a people that were perceived as a threat. Whether sincerely believed or as part of a political scheme, the new king who did not know Joseph saw the Hebrew people as a danger to him and to his nation. So he tried to eliminate them.

First the king encouraged his people to hate the Hebrews. So the Egyptians reacted by becoming ruthless in how they treated them and so made their lives bitter. But the king was not satisfied, so he did more. The king ordered the Hebrew midwives to murder the male children of the Hebrews. But the midwives feared God and refused to carry out the king's order. Frustrated by this, the king commanded that all Hebrew boys were to be thrown into the Nile.

Here is where Moses entered the story and this is how Moses got into trouble— simply by being born. You see, as a Hebrew boy, the king had ordered he must be thrown into the Nile. His mother followed the letter of the law and put him in the river. But she had a plan that resulted in Moses being rescued. And not just by anyone—by the king's own daughter! There is more than a little irony in how the story turned out. Moses' mother actually ended up getting paid by the princess to raise her son.

Eventually, as part of her deal with Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was returned to be raised in the king's household. We are not sure from the story how old Moses was at the time of his return. We don't know how much his mother was able to teach him and form him in what it meant to be a Hebrew and to follow the faith of Abraham. At some point, though, Moses came to Pharaoh's family and began to learn what it meant to be an Egyptian. That is another way to get into trouble—to learn two different sets of beliefs that are incompatible and then try to sort them out as you grow up.

In Moses' story, we learn it caused him great inner conflict that was eventually expressed in outward violence. He observed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and could not stand it—so he chose a side and reacted in the heat of the moment with the passion of fighting injustice. Moses killed the Egyptian

and hid his body. The next day, he observed two Hebrews fighting and tried to stop it. Moses is shocked when the Hebrew told him to back off and asked if he intended to kill him like he killed the Egyptian yesterday. Moses knew he was in trouble.

Since the news about his crime was out, Moses decided to flee. That was a good thing because Pharaoh had found out and wanted to kill Moses. Moses was definitely in trouble now and spent the next several years in exile in a foreign land. What must Moses have thought during his time away from his two peoples—Hebrews and Egyptians? Did he question the God of his ancestors? Did he question his life? Did he feel like he had blown it because he knew from his Hebrew mother what was right and tried to do it—and failed? We don't know but we can imagine.

What we do know from the story is that one day Moses was out walking with the sheep he was tending and saw something amazing-- a burning bush-- and he turned aside. Today we read the story of this encounter. Moses learned that God sees, God hears, what is happening in Egypt to the Hebrew people-- and what is happening in Moses heart. There is a cry coming up to God due to the oppression of God's people by the powerful. And God intends to intervene and make things right.

But here is where things got complicated for Moses—God intends to use him for this intervention. Moses is the first prophet, the first activist if you will, who got into trouble because he listened to God and did what God wanted him to do. That is a special kind of trouble indeed. And Moses knew it would be a problem-- he gave every type of excuse to avoid the trouble. It would have been much simpler to stay in exile as a shepherd in a foreign land. But despite his excuses, God pressed Moses until he finally obeyed.

How do you feel about the type of trouble that Moses got into? Can you relate to it? For him, there were four main steps that got him into trouble—he was born into a people being oppressed by a powerful empire; he was brought into the bowels of that empire and raised as a member of the elite; he reacted against that unjust power in an unjust way, murdering someone who was beating one of his people; and finally he began a journey to be involved in God's type of trouble through exile and questioning, divine encounter and reluctant obedience.

Quite a story. It is the root story for prophets that are to come throughout the stories of the Bible. Prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah, Mary and John the Baptist, and of course Jesus. Their stories have similarities and differences. But all of them share an experience of life that made real to them how unjust their society was; and an encounter with God that called them to respond whether they wanted to or not. And often they got into trouble-- death, prison, and exile. Being a prophet is hard.

For most of us, we prefer to avoid that type of trouble. We like the status quo, even if it is boring, even if we have that nagging feeling that something bigger than us is wrong with our world and we should do something. But we don't. Sometimes because we are simply too busy with work and family and such. Sometimes because we don't know what to do. The problems of our world seem overwhelming and beyond what we can control.

I imagine Moses felt that way, too. What could he do as a member of Pharaoh's household? Did he talk with the king and try to persuade him to let up on the Hebrews? Did he stew in silence until he finally acted out in anger, killing the Egyptian? I would guess both of those responses were part of Moses' story before his flight into exile.

There are other parts of his story that turned Moses from exile to prophet. Those parts may help us, too. The first part—know who we are. Know our story as part of the bigger story of the nation we live in and the people we identify with. Know history through listening to the stories of family and friends—and listening to people who are different from us and who have very different experiences. Really listen. Take time to read, especially the histories that challenge-- and complete-- our nation's story the way we have always heard it. When we take those steps, it will begin to get us into trouble.

The second part is to be open to God. Moses was out on a walk, just doing his job, when he encountered God. In the midst of our confusion and busyness, God is always present. Like the words of the prophet Micah centuries ago, the Spirit calls out to us “do justice... love mercy... walk humbly with God.” That is how we know when we are hearing God's voice and not our own nor that of the people in power—when we hear the repeated poetry of justice, mercy, and humility.

The third part is to do something. It probably won't be as big as Moses' action. And that is okay—Moses had a hard time of it in Egypt and in the desert. But we can do something. It may be something simple but courageous, like Pharaoh's daughter rescuing a little boy from the Nile. For our time and place, something like volunteering at Mentor Me or Family Promise. Or something more, like becoming a foster family. Doing any of those things would be wonderful.

But the story of Moses did not stop with his individual rescue. Saving one Hebrew baby boy at a time was not enough to set God's people free. Someone needed to stand up against the systemic abuses being done in Egypt. It involved challenging the powerful with a simple message, “Let my people go.” And it involved Moses trusting in God to support and empower him in his witness for justice. Scary stuff, getting in trouble stuff.

Today in our world of turmoil and division, it helps to remember Moses. We can do little things in life—they matter. Be courteous to all. Love and take care of our families and the people in our lives in tangible ways. And it is also important not to forget the big things. We can do both. When something is unjust, we can bear witness to God's justice, like Moses did. If we believe what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, then our life and our work is to help bring God's peaceable kingdom on earth. That is the type of trouble we need to get into as people of faith. May God give us the courage to do it. Amen.