

Text: Exodus 3-4
St Stephen's

March 6-7, 2010
Sun AM Sat PM

God's School of Wilderness

On the weekends of Lent we are looking at **the theme of wilderness** that is so prevalent in the OT and the NT. Bill started us out with a look at Jesus' temptation during his 40 days in the wilderness, and Aaron last week looked at Abraham and his call to leave behind everything as he followed God's call. **Abraham and Jesus knew all about the wilderness.**

Today we look at **Moses**; he was **a friend of the wilderness**, too. I want to start out with a paragraph from the NT. These words come from **St Stephen**, just before his martyrdom. He is summing up the history of Israel and has a few things to say about Moses. He starts with this...

At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

Acts 7.20-22

These short sentences actually **cover about 40 years** of Moses' life. Born a Hebrew during a time when all Hebrew mothers were under command to **put their male sons to death** ('exposed'), he was packed up into a basket and set afloat on the Nile. He was found in the **bulrushes** by the daughter of Pharaoh, who took him in, and arranged to have a Hebrew midwife nurse him – who turned out to be Moses' own mother! So Moses, '*beautiful in God's sight*' (what a phrase!), was raised in the household of Pharaoh, with all the **privileges of a divine son**. (Lots of our kids think they are divine!)

By the time he was 40, he would have had **advanced training** in science, literature, military tactics and leadership, culture and that strange language of Egyptian hieroglyphics. The wealth and splendor of Egypt was at his service. His career track was straight up, with no limits. This is '**Phase One**' of Moses' life.

Stephen tells us that '**Phase Two**' of his life launched...

"When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.

He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand."

Acts 7.23-25

It became known that Moses had killed the Egyptian, and **the Jews didn't like it** – probably because they thought it would get them in a lot **more trouble** than they already were in – and **Pharaoh didn't like it** – he certainly saw it as **betrayal** by his adopted son. Pharaoh put a contract out on Moses to have him killed. Right there, at the age of 40, **Moses' world collapsed**. Rejected by his own people, rejected by his adopted family, stripped of all his privileges - he became a hunted man and **fled** into the Egyptian wilderness. Here is Stephen's **summary of phase two** in Moses' life:

At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. Now when forty years had passed...

Acts 7.29-30

Don't miss that last little phrase – '*now **when 40 years had passed***'. **Phase 2** of Moses' life went from the **age of 40 to the age of 80**. Wilderness regions like **Midian** are difficult places to live. They are hot and harsh, arid and life-sapping. Midian was rocky, kind of like a moon-scape. This is **not Palm Desert** or Sedona. Its more like **Death Valley**. In all probability, you or I could not find a way to live there.

He had **hired himself out as a shepherd** to a man named Jethro. Eventually he married one of Jethro's daughters and had two sons.

I want to give a name to this second phase of Moses' life. Let's call it '**The School of the Wilderness**'. It seems as though God's best

leaders always go to this school. **Abraham** did. **Moses** spent most of his life there. **Joshua** grew up there. **Israel** was formed in the wilderness. Think of **David's** years as a shepherd boy. Think of **John** the Baptist, of **Jesus'** 40 days and his frequent retreats, think of **Paul's** first years after his conversion in the deserts of Arabia. Do you **see the pattern?** Not very many apply for admission, but actually most of us seem to be **sent there**. Maybe you are there now...

It is one of **God's special places**, the place where things get stripped away, the place where He gets our attention, the place where we learn who we really are. I'd like to **review the curriculum** in the School of Wilderness with you this day. Just in case you find yourself there!

A Curriculum in Obscurity and Scarcity

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian...

Exodus 3.1

This verse is written near the end of Phase Two, when **Moses is 79 or 80 years old**. Near what we would call **the end of life**, Moses **didn't have very much to show** for his years.

In **Phase One** of his life, Moses was an important man, **a rising star**, a favored son. When he walked into a room, people stood up. When he spoke, people listened. When he commanded, people obeyed.

In **Phase Two**, he is **a nobody, a hired hand** on someone else's ranch. The palaces of Egypt were long gone. All his wealth – gone. All his servants – gone. All the recognition – gone. All the connections – gone. All his sense of self-importance – gone.

Moses' assignment in life is a herd of someone else's sheep; he doesn't own a single one of them. His neighborhood is an uninhabited range of desert that no one on earth wants. He will wander from barren patch to barren patch, from waterhole to waterhole with these sheep.

This has gone on for 40 years. Moses is a **nobody**, and he is hip deep in a course in scarcity, powerlessness and obscurity.

It is **God's school of the wilderness, and God put him there**. The place where Moses could **learn how to be a nobody** – when you learn that, you **have room for Somebody**. Somebody special.

A Curriculum in Solitude and Silence

...and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Exodus 3.1

Moses is spending **great tracks of time alone**. That would be the **life of a shepherd**, and even more so in a desert region where adequate pastures would be far and few between. So Moses, we are told, *led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God*

He was alone on these treks; his boys would stay at home with his wife when they were young. His **only companions** along the journey – the sheep. The **only sounds** he would hear would – again, the sheep. The desert does not have much sound. Maybe the sound of the wind. But not much else. Except **the sound of silence and solitude**. Have you **ever heard that sound?**

One of the most profound times for me in the wilderness was **during my Sabbatical** when I was at a Monastery in Pasadena. I was studying with Dallas Willard during those weeks, and **every day after class I would walk out the back door of the monastery and head up into the foothills** of the Sierras. You only had to go 20 yards and you were in the hills. I would turn off my cell phone and leave my ipod behind, and begin to **climb**. As I hiked up, I **rarely saw another person**. The LA basin stretched out to the west, and the hills went straight up to the east.

I **hiked almost every day for 2-3 hours**, and most of the days out there I was eating very lightly. I would often stop for **prayer** along the way. After about **45 mins of climbing**, something wonderful happened.

The sounds of the city were gone, and I could hear the sounds of the hills. You could hear the wind, and an occasional bird, - but mostly it was **quiet**. And I was **alone**. I loved the **streams**, and often went to them and sat still. I loved the **flowers** and cactus-like **plants**, strange and wild in their beauty. I would stop and look at them at length. I explored almost every trail within a 2 hour radius on those hills. What I found was something remarkable.

In the **solitude**, I found that I was **not alone** - that God himself was abundantly near, closer than the air I breathed.

In the **silence**, I found that **I could hear** – that as the rush and noise of the world stepped back, as the noise of my own mind settled down, I found that I could **hear God** with greater clarity. You find these things in the school of wilderness.

Obscurity and scarcity, silence and solitude are God's curriculum in the wilderness, and they are servants of something, **Someone** far greater...

A Curriculum Face to Face with God

Moses was **advanced in years**, now. No one would even recognize him back in Egypt; his black hair was now white, his extraordinary looks were long buried under four decades of desert life and labor and weathered skin. He had long thought that his **best years were behind**. He was **servicing out his days**. And then it happened; Moses brought his flock around Mt Horeb...

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up... God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:2-6

Moses **took his shoes off**. I want to ask you to do the same with me here (metaphorically!!). This is holy ground.

Did you ever wonder **who it was** that met Moses that day in the bush? Moses found himself face to face with a messenger of the Lord who claims to be the Lord. Someone who was different from the Lord and who was the same as the Lord. This was Moses first meeting with one he would come to know well. Moses took his shoes off.

Have you ever had a moment like that? When unexpected and unbidden God himself steps in, and there you are standing on holy ground, face to face with God? **In the wilderness, God brings you to the end of yourself, and then he brings you to himself.** And you know that you better take your shoes off and bend your head to the ground. God picked Moses up and said...

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Exodus 3:10

With that call, Moses came to **Phase Three** of his life. Instead of finding that his life's purpose was behind him, he heard that his life's purpose yet lay in front of him! At 80! **Moses starts to beg off...**

Excuse: "I am a nobody"

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Exodus 3:11

Answer: "I will be with you"

And God said, "I will be with you." Exodus 3:12

Excuse: "But I don't know you well enough"

"Suppose I go to the Israelites ...and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" Exodus 3:13

Answer: "You will know me by name"

"This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' Exodus 3:14-15

The name translated I AM comes from the Hebrew verb "to be." It is the name that **Jesus took** to himself when he said "before Abraham was, I am." This is the one who said, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore... and I have the keys to death and Hades.'

Rev 1.18

He wishes to be known to you by name...

Moses would go on for a bit... But the **excuses really don't matter** in the end. That is what the school of wilderness teaches us. It teaches us that **the strength of Moses is not an issue**. God never gives Moses a pep talk or a pat on the back. We would! We would put him in front of a mirror and have him say over and over – "You are somebody fantastic!" (American Idol last night – "I get in front of a mirror and jump up and down and shout, 'You are amazing!...'")

Moses will have none of this. He's been to the School of **obscurity and scarcity, of silence and solitude** – and in that place - **at the end of himself**, he has stood in the holy place, face to face with **the Living One**, and there he has found himself.

So he does what any sane man would do. He takes off his shoes and bows deeply to the ground and stops his excuses and yields – simply saying, 'Here I am.'