

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

## “Two Guys Who Became Pilgrims”

Exodus 3 and Matthew 16: 21-28

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Two stories about two guys who became pilgrims. They stammer and stumble... but despite all that, wind up as spiritual heroes. It's not unusual to find them displayed in stained glass or statues... one holding two tablets, the other keys... “keys to the kingdom.”

They're both central to our faith story... One in the Old Testament... the other the New. One of them starts out tending sheep out in the desert, the other... catching fish on the Sea.

Both are full of great potential...

Both are called...

Both resist... what the calling will mean...

Both say yes and know because of it...

great challenge and pain...

and growth and salvation.

There's Moses... retired, more or less, from a short career in public life that had ended in scandal. He tends his father-in-law's sheep and has been at that for some time. It's a simple but demanding life... moving the flock here and there... dealing with all a desert can serve up. Day in day out for about 40 years. Sheep... sand... an occasional fire.

That's the life God interrupts with a fire in a bush... no big deal in the desert except for the fact that this one doesn't burn up... that... and it talks. It is a theophany... a moment when the Divine pulls back the curtain for the world's sake.

**“I've seen what it's like down there and I'm going to act, Moses, and act in you... I'm sending you.”**

Moses is sitting there... smelling like a shepherd... listening to an angelic voice over the bleating of all his sheep... thinking... and saying, **“You've got to be kidding me.”**

First there's the “who am I” protest... It's a protest God doesn't respond to directly... God just says, **“I'll be with you,”** implying that who Moses is, isn't what is most important, but who He, God is.

So, then there's the second protest, “Who are you?” Moses says, **“A name... I'm gonna need a name. They'll want some I.D.”**

It's one of my favorite moments in scripture... In two lines God speaks the essential paradox of our faith.

First, he just says, **“Tell them, I Am... tell them ‘being’ sent you.”** First, he gives him a mystery... almost like he's playing with him. **“I'll be what I'll be.”**

But then, he turns right around and says, **“Tell them I'm the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”** The mystery gets named... narrowed... storied.

And there's the paradox we must embrace. God is revealed and veiled. God is named and God is beyond naming.

We need a name and even more than that... we need to know the limits of a name... the limits of our knowing.

Moses wants more but this will have to do... And after a few more protests and some pretty fancy miracle working with a staff-turned-snake thing, he's on his way.

Moses takes off...

He leaves...

He starts a journey that he knows will be impossible.

Impossible... and painful... He knows he will suffer. Probably not to the extent but he knows. He'd rather stay with the sheep, I'm sure. It'd be a lot easier. It's what he knows. He's good at it... confident... He's an introvert and doesn't have to deal with people.

All that is going to change... right.

Moses let's go of what he knows and says yes to lunatic Pharaohs... and stiff necked, complaining, idol-building people. People who will often hate him. It's a people-pleaser's nightmare... knowing everyday he'll disappoint someone.

But he says yes... to something beyond him... To too much to do. To a God who seems here today and gone tomorrow. To plagues and punishments. All to take a people to a Promised Land that he doesn't get to set foot in at the end of the day.

There's Moses.

Then, there's Peter. I think Peter is a little older than Jesus and the other disciples, don't you? Not retired but thinking about it... Little place on the beach maybe... He's doing his fishing thing when Jesus finds him and everything changes.

Along the way, Peter sees some amazing things...

Hears some wonderful things...

Including that little voice in his head saying,

**"Jesus is the One."**

And one day, when he finally gets the chance, he blurts out, **"You're the Christ, the Son of the Living God."** Kudos for Peter. On this rock I'll build my church.

He's busting the buttons on his tunic with spiritual pride when Jesus starts filling them in on what it will mean to be messiah. Peter's having these visions of grandeur about Jesus where he, of course, is standing at his right side... when Jesus starts talking about suffering and dying... and it's jolting

Peter can't keep his mouth shut and Cameron Jorgenson says he does the Karl Rove thing... pulls Jesus aside and says... **"Okay, look, you're spinning this all wrong."**

Actually... the text says it's more confrontive... that he pulls Jesus aside to rebuke him, **"You shut up, Jesus... we aren't going to die."**

So like Moses, he resists what it means to be on this journey and to be a part of the world's redemption. Jesus is clear, **"Following me will mean self-denial... cross bearing... losing your life..."** and for Peter that's all backwards. Why would anybody say yes to something like that?

Eventually he does... he stumbles his way to following and understanding... and leading. He lets go of where he is and what he thinks his life was all about. He doesn't get to retire on the shores of Galilee, and at the end of it all, if the tradition is right, he is crucified upside down.

There's Moses... and there's Peter... and there's you.

Invited... called to walk into life in a redemptive way... for yours and the world's sake. And if you're like Moses and Peter... something in you will resist because you know... you can tell... that this path, this pilgrimage isn't going to be a cakewalk.

Some of that is because of the world and what's out there... it's a mess, isn't it? You know you'll get messed up by getting in it.

Some of it's because of you and your particular reality... who you are and what life involves. Stuff that's in you... things that have happened.

Some of it's God and the mysterious redemptive thing God is doing... and we have a sneaking suspicion that saints are right when they tell us that some of the difficulty may even be God's doing.

So you know... and you resist... Embracing this difficult way isn't your first instinct. It isn't mine... I'm doing the whole Moses thing, usually. Offering my excuses and protest... One of the ones I offer up is one that didn't make it into print... but I know Moses was feeling it. It's the **"What difference will it make anyway?"** protest.

**"If I say yes... will it really matter, God? I know those folks, they won't change... they don't really want to be free."**

Julie and I were walking along the beach with our friends when we were in the Boston area... and we walked by this little kid, maybe four, who was working feverishly... digging a hole and proud of it.

He had dug a great hole...

About 3 feet deep and 4 foot square.

It was amazing for a little guy with a little shovel.

Had a hat with flaps over his ears.

And you know what my first thought was... "glass mostly empty" kind of guy that I am? **"He's going to be really ticked off in about an hour when the tide comes in."** All that effort's going to be washed away... by that big, bad, mysterious, uncontrollable sea. **"He's sure gonna be mad."**

Why give yourself to something you can't control? Why love and invest if you can't predict things... and fix things? Why walk into this... be a pilgrim... if I know good and well what it's going to mean?

Because you know... you know because of the stories of Moses and Peter... and you know that if you journey... if you say "yes" to life, it's going to involve you in suffering. There's no journey apart from it...

And no becoming apart from it. It seems to be the only path for growing up... Pain is the preferred teacher and life going to bring it to us... serve it up... one way or the other... one lesson plan after the other.

Pilgrims have a way of seeing it, though. They know something about it... it teaches... it is what one Spiritual Father called "educative desolation." (Diadochus of Photike)

I heard Richard Rohr speaking recently and he said that the only growth that occurs in the second half of life occurs through our suffering and our willingness to say "yes" to it. O boy!

**“Our wounds,”** he said, **“Can become sacred or they can remain bleeding, useless, scabs that never heal.”** (Hope Against Darkness, 166)

Jesus is clear... the gospel story is clear... the cross event is clear... that you cannot separate salvation from suffering. And when we hear it maybe we nod at one level, but at a deeper level we resist. We're screaming “no way” and offering every protest imaginable.

We want a path that is predictable and perfect... no messiness... no difficult people... no frustrations... no darkness... no waves to ruin what we've done.

We want life to be that way and we want to be that way... no weaknesses... no wounds... certainly, no crosses to bear.

There must be another way...

A way that does not involve facing darkness...

A way of passing on this cup.

There's not... not if we want life... Eternal... Real... Life. We must, if we're to be whole, learn to bear this in a certain way. If we're to be whole... and if the world is... And... you cannot... we will not, have one without the other. The world's wholeness without yours.

Jesus says, **“follow me”** and then walks towards suffering... into it... and through it. And if we follow... we bear it, too... carry it... and ... and ... we are transformed by it because of the grace and power of God.

The question really is not, "Will you have your cross to bear?" It's not, **“will you have your wounds?”** The only question is whether or not your wounds will be a source of grace and healing for you and for the world.

This is the hope of Glory and the way of Jesus... God's way... saying yes to life which leads to death... which leads to Life.

We got to talking... at Lectionary Breakfast, about suffering and how some folks handle it and some just don't. Gary Stripling told us about his father who had polio as a young person... and how gracefully he'd handled his suffering all his life and the pain he knew.

He said that his father walked with a very significant limp... back and forth... awkwardly, noticeably, back and forth all his life. Gary said that when he was a boy... like most boys, he watched his dad... and began to walk like his dad. Wanted to be like his dad, I guess... His mom had to remind him not to limp. He limped... because his father limped.

You can do that... Limp because your Father did... A Father who suffers... A God who is wounded for the world's sake.

Come here... Limp here... You're in great company. Limp here with your wounds... suffering... darkness and all. There is grace here... not there in your hiding... here at this table in your receiving.

Come... take all of it.

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