

The Cruciform Life: Moses
by William Morrow

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Kingston ON
March 17, 2019

Texts: Exodus 2:23–3:15; Matthew 4:1-11

This sermon is the third in a series on what I have been calling “the cruciform life.” Or, if you like, “the cross-shaped life.” The cross-shaped life is a spiritual paradigm characterized by three features:

- 1) movement from one way of being to another: transition
- 2) suffering caused by breaking some sorts of cultural conventions or social norms
- 3) transformation.

This week, I would like to consider that process from the perspective of our sense of God. In the cruciform life, God not only accomplishes transformation, but in the process the sense of God is transformed.

The true story I'm telling now is one I first encountered through a play presented by Bottletree productions, who rent space from your church: When he was 18 years old, Josiah Henson, who had born into slavery in the state of Maryland, went to church for the first time in his life. The year was 1807. He knew nothing about Christianity, except for the fact that his mother had taught him the Lord's prayer. The preacher spoke on Hebrews 2:9 (using, of course, the King James version), “That he, by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” In his memoirs Henson writes,

I was wonderfully impressed...with the use which the preacher made of the last words of the text, “*for every man.*” He said that the death of Christ was not designed for the benefit of a select few only, but for the salvation of the whole world, for the bond as well as the free; and he dwelt on the glad tidings of the Gospel to the poor, the persecuted, and the distressed, its deliverance to the captive, and the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, till my heart burned within me and I was in a state of the greatest excitement at the thought that such a being as Jesus Christ had been described should have died for me—for *me* among the rest—a poor, despised, abused slave, who was thought by his fellow creatures fit for nothing but unrequited toil and ignorance, for mental and bodily degradation.¹

Henson goes on to say, “I date my conversion from that day, and my awakening to a new life—a consciousness of superior powers and destiny to anything I had conceived of before...glimmerings of light from another world...had reached my own eye.”²

¹ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave: As Narrated by Himself* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1851), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

What did Josiah Henson discover on that fateful Sunday morning? I suggest that he discovered a vision of a God-Beyond.³ A God beyond the confines of his imagination, shackled as they were by the ideology of slavery. A God beyond the reach of slaveholders and plantation owners and the life they said was possible for a slave.

Henson actually lived his own version of the cruciform life. Eventually, he and his family would escape the cruel bonds of slavery and make their way to Canada. Transition. Not only did he flee unlawfully as a slave; he boasts of having helped more than 100 people escape the same fate—often under perilous circumstances. Suffering brought about by breaking cultural conventions. But he did not come to Canada only to enjoy freedom; he worked tirelessly to improve the lot of his fellow-ex slaves, eventually even founding a school for their children—a revolutionary step for a group that had forbidden to learn to read. Transformation.

We can see a similar set of conditions in our reading from Exodus. Here also we are confronted with the cruelties of slavery; but here also we find the hope of resurrection. In the case of Moses, though he was once a prince of Egypt, his history of crime and rebellion has reduced him to the status of a nomadic shepherd in the desert. But Moses was about to undergo an amazing transformation. Like Henson, glimmerings of light from another world reached his eye. Confronted by the vision of the burning bush, he would become God's chosen change-agent in history: a type of Messiah sent to set his people free.

What kind of God is capable of engineering such a transformation, of sustaining Moses through the sufferings of the cross-shaped life? It is no accident, that before the biblical drama of the Exodus can unfold, Moses has to discover the God Beyond. In reply to the call of God Moses asks, "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?"

There is nothing strange about the Israelites' question. They lived in a world in which the god they thought was especially concerned with them was the god of their ancestors. According to the scriptures, Abraham knew his protecting deity by the name *El Shaddai* (which may mean, "God Almighty"),⁴ or as *El Elyon*, "God most high."⁵ This same deity was also known as "the Fear of Isaac,"⁶ and "the Mighty One of Jacob."⁷ But such religious knowledge was inadequate for the Israelites, bent as they were under the lash of Egypt. They needed a vision of divine reality beyond the immediate needs of Jacob and Isaac. But, they also needed a god who was beyond the remoteness of being "God most high."

God's answer to Moses' question contains a revelation pregnant with significance for the religious history of the entire world: "I am who I am... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' " Another translation of this enigmatic phrase, one which I favour, is "I am

³ I owe this term and the concepts behind it to John J. Shea, "The God Beyond," *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995): 411-31.

⁴ Genesis 17:1

⁵ Genesis 14:19

⁶ Genesis 31:53

⁷ Genesis 49:24

the One Who Is.”⁸ It is the-One-who-is that sends Moses to set Israel free. Scholars still debate how to pronounce the name of the deity who revealed himself to Moses. Nowadays, the general consensus is that this name should be pronounced “Yahweh.” Yahweh must mean something like “He is” or “the one who is.” It’s an unusual name, because it both reveals and hides at the same time.

On the one hand, the name “Yahweh” connotes a new intimacy with God. This is the God with whom Moses can speak, as the scriptures tell it, face to face. This is the God who loves, chooses, who is personally available to individuals in distress. This is the God we know in Christ as Emmanuel, “God with us.”⁹ But, at the same time, the name Yahweh hides as well as reveals. Throughout biblical thought, the fact that Israel’s God is the “one who is” means that God is always the God Beyond. Beyond our theological imaginations, beyond our needs to put God into the service of human plans, beyond the desires of rulers to make God serve their own interests, there is the One-Who-Is. Yahweh is free. He resists all attempts at definition or manipulation. He is beholden to no Pharaoh. No one can stand in his way when Yahweh says, “let my people go,” because the biblical god is the source of being itself.

What a paradox! The very God who reveals a desire to be closer to people than they could ever ask or imagine is also a God who cannot be manipulated or backed into a corner. That was the experience of Jesus in the wilderness. His search for genuine intimacy with God also led him to a place where he refused to put God in a corner. For Jesus, who had the closest relationship with God that you can conceive, God was also the God Beyond. In Christ, God was sending a Messiah beyond all expectations people had of what God’s chosen change-agent in history was supposed to do. For the Messiah’s major mission wasn’t to feed the poor; it wasn’t to do death-defying miracles; it wasn’t to rule the world through secular power. No, Jesus suffered in the desert only to emerge with a knowledge that his ultimate ministry was beyond all of those things, as worthy as they may seem. His God was a God Beyond.

I believe this same vision, the vision of Exodus, the vision of Jesus, the vision of Josiah Henson—the vision of a God Beyond is what is needed in the Church and the world of our time. I preach these words aware that only a few days ago, 49 Muslims were gunned down in New Zealand. The motivation was clearly born of hatred for immigrants of another culture and another skin colour. For Canadians, this incident has an eerie resonance in the Quebec City mosque shootings a few years ago. Not that hatred is confined to one group. A recent report on the rise of anti-Semitism in France documents the rise of religious bigotry in that country.¹⁰ And we can easily dig into Christian history to find examples of hate. Whether it be the European witch hunts or the systemic hatred implicated in the establishment of Canada’s system of Indian residential schools, the same conclusion forces itself upon us: human hate knows no single religion, and hatred can use all religions to full advantage.

We need a bigger God than the God of our ancestors, and a bigger God than one who underwrites the dynamics of hate. Post-modern philosopher John Caputo alludes to the God

⁸ Difficulties in translation the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3:14 have occupied scholars for a long time; see the discussion in J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 75-77.

⁹ Matthew 1:23

¹⁰ Marc Weitzman, “Code Yellow,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 16, 2019.

Beyond when he talks about the “Theology of the event.”¹¹ The event he refers to, is the event that takes place whenever human beings encounter each other. Caputo suggests that no matter how much we perceive of the another person, something is always left over in that encounter. Each of us bears an excess meaning in the presence of other, and in that excess of meaning we find an intimation of the God Beyond.

This is not to say, that such a perception is easy to acquire. All of us know people who are difficult to like, easy to dislike and even hate. It happens at church, it happens at home, in our jobs and on the street. It seems like an extravagant flight of a preacher’s imagination to suggest that any human encounter bears with it “glimmerings of light from another world.” But as we grapple with our own capacity to hate—whether it be to hate ourselves or other human beings—perhaps like Moses we too are being called to undertake the cross-shaped journey. Perhaps, like Jesus we too are being called to cast off temptations to look at other people or ourselves in conventional ways. As Moses discovered in the desert, and Jesus in the wilderness, there is One who bestows upon us a meaningfulness that no ideology, no other human being, and no religion can fully define or comprehend. And that is the One revealed in the burning bush as The-One-Who-Is, the God Beyond.

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2006).