

Exodus 4 “Israel Is My Firstborn Son”
Psalm 8
Galatians 3:10-4:7

February 5, 2017

Earlier, in Exodus 3:19, God said that the king of Egypt would not let them go
“unless compelled by a mighty hand.”
Now, God says, “I will harden his heart.”

You’d never guess this from the English,
but the Hebrew root is the same for the *mighty* hand and the *hardened* heart.
We’ll see this in the coming weeks:
Pharaoh’s hardness of heart has two sources –
his own stubbornness – and God’s mighty hand.

Many have struggled with the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.
How is it fair?
Pharaoh was willing to let them go!

But that wasn’t the point.
The point was not simply, “Let my people go.”
The point was that Egypt had enslaved God’s people –
brutally mistreated them – even slaughtering their baby boys.

God’s point is that Egypt needs to suffer for what they have done.

Abraham Lincoln understood this point well –
as he put it in his second inaugural address in 1865:

“If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which,
in the providence of God, must needs come,
but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove,
and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war
as the woe due to those by whom the offense came,
shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes
which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray,
that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

Yet, if God wills that it continue
until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil
shall be sunk,
and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash
shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,
as was said three thousand years ago,

so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.""

God has a habit of making nations pay for their sins.

There are many wars that are too complex to give a simple answer for.

But I think Lincoln was right.

More than 600,000 men died in the Civil War because of slavery.

And that is what God is saying to Moses.

Egypt cannot escape God's judgment for what they have done.

Even if they free the slaves and let them go –

No, God will not let them get away with it that easily.

Judgment is coming.

And with that sober thought,

let us sing our Psalm of response – Psalm 8 –

a song that gives thanks to God because he does protect his people from their foes.

Sing Psalm 8

Read Galatians 3:10-4:7

Paul recounts the whole history of the people of God

as the history of the inheritance – the history of the Son of God.

God told Moses, "Israel is my son – my firstborn" –

I like to think of it this way:

Israel in the wilderness was like the terrible twos.

Then, Israel's teenage rebellion got them sent into Exile.

But then came Jesus –

and in Jesus the firstborn son grew up and entered his inheritance.

1. "I Will Be with Your Mouth" – God Overrides Moses' Objections (v1-17)

a. They Will Not Believe Me – Signs "That They May Believe" (v1-9)

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" ² *The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff."* ³ *And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it.* ⁴ *But the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—* ⁵ *"that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."* ⁶ *Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak."* ^[a] *And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous^[b] like snow.* ⁷ *Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.* ⁸ *"If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.* ⁹ *If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you*

shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

Last week, we heard Moses offer his first two objections:

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?

(And God responded “That doesn’t matter. I am with you.”)

And then Moses asked,

If I tell the people “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask
“what is his name?”

what shall I say?

(And God responded “I AM” – Yahweh – has sent you)

Now Moses offers his third objection.

They will not believe me.

This is still a good, faithful question.

After all, Moses has good reason to think that they won’t believe him!

When he killed the Egyptian no one thought of him as a deliverer.

If he shows up now, what will they say?

You’re nuts!

Why should we believe you?

And so God gives Moses three signs:

the staff that turns into a serpent,

the hand that becomes leprous – and then is restored,

and the water that turns into blood.

The staff will later be called “the staff of God” (v20).

In the ancient world, your staff functioned as a means of identification.

It was not a random walking stick.

Certainly you could use it for protection,

but it would be personalized in such a way

that everyone around you knew that *this* is your staff.

And God says that these signs are given “so that they may believe that the LORD,

the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,

has appeared to you.”

God had promised that the Seed of the Woman would crush the head of the serpent –

serpents were also important in Egyptian culture,

so this sign points to the crushing of Egypt under the heel of God’s firstborn son.

The restoration of lepers will be a key theme in the wilderness –

life coming out of death.

And the water of the Nile turning to blood is perhaps the scariest of all.

Because if the Nile turns to blood –
then *everything* dies (because the Nile the only source of water in Egypt).

b. I Am Not Eloquent – “Who Has Made Man’s Mouth?” (v10-12)

So far all of Moses’ objections have been quite good and proper.

In verse 10, however, Moses begins to reveal his true colors:

¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” ¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”

It may be true that Moses was not eloquent.

God does not reply by saying, “Oh, but Moses, when you were in Pharaoh’s household you gave a great speech!”

No, God replies by pointing out that if *I* send you,
then *I* will be with your mouth.

This is the same point that Jesus will make to his disciples –

“When they deliver you over [to governors and kings for my sake],
do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say,
for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.

For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”
(Matt 10:19-20)

What has God called you to do?

I’m not talking about some mystical feeling you have had.

I’m talking about God’s open and clear calling.

Think about how Paul puts this in Ephesians 4:1 –

where he urges us “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling
to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

What has God called you to do?

He has called you to walk together as the people of God.

You have been called out of darkness into light.

You have been called into the one Body of Christ –

as Paul says in the next verse, “There is one body and one Spirit –
just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.”

And Christ has given gifts to his church –
he has given the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers
to equip the saints –
and he has given each of us gifts for building up the body in love.

God's call on your life is very clear:
Love him – love one another.
What that will mean this week will depend on your circumstances,
but God promises that his Spirit will give you all that you need
in order to do what he has called you to do.

And too often we respond just like Moses:

c. Please Send Someone Else – “Aaron...Can Speak Well” (v13-17)
¹³ *But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.”*

What Moses is saying is very simple:
I don't want to love you – I don't want to love your people –
I just want to live my comfortable little life out here in the desert.
I've got my wife – I've got my kids – I've got my job –
I don't want to dive into the mess and muck of your people in Egypt!

Isn't that what we say to God?
“Send someone else.”
I have enough to do here – don't tell me that I have to love *those people* –
those people who rejected me –
those people who are so set in their ways –
those people who are so fearful and trapped –
Please send someone else.

God was okay with all of Moses' other questions and objections.
But when Moses tries to bow out of God's call:

¹⁴ *Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. ¹⁶ He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. ¹⁷ And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.”*

In one sense, God accepts Moses' objection.
Fine, you don't have to be the spokesman.
But you are *not* getting out of this call.

The gifts and the calling of God is irrevocable.
When God has called you to a task – to a calling –
the only way out is rebellion.
And, as we have seen repeatedly in this series,
Moses is a man of faith.
It's true that he wavered – and wished that God would send someone else –
but in the end, when the anger of the LORD burned against him –
and when the LORD commanded Aaron to come and meet him –
Moses accepted the call and took up his staff and went.

Aaron will be the spokesman – and Moses will be “God” to him.
In other words, Moses will tell him what to say – and Aaron will say it.

2. “Israel Is My Firstborn Son” – Moses Goes Back to Egypt (v18-26)

a. Leaving Jethro (v18-20)

¹⁸ *Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, “Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.”*
¹⁹ *And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.”* ²⁰ *So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.*

So Moses travels back to Midian – to his father-in-law, Jethro –
and Moses requests permission to return to Egypt.
Having joined himself to the household of Jethro,
Moses does not have authority simply to leave.
In the ancient world, you are always part of a group.
Our idea that each adult can make his or her own decision
is a *very* modern one!
Moses is somewhere between the age of 40-80 when he leaves Midian,
but he still needs the permission of his father-in-law!

I'm not going to argue that we should return to the old ways on this one –
but I will say that we should view the family of Jesus in this way.
We should not make major decisions without consulting the wisdom of others.
And we should be the sort of community – the sort of family –
that recognizes our interdependence – our need for each other in Jesus.
Of course, at the same time, we should recognize that the one family of Jesus
can be found all over the world!
So wherever we go we should get connected – and pursue those connections –
with one another.

Why have I been emphasizing all of this “New Testament” language about Jesus and the Church?
Aren't we still in the Law of Moses?

Well, that's why I've called verses 21-23, "the central message."

This is the central message of the Book of Exodus.

Indeed, it is the central message of the whole Bible.

b. The Central Message: "Let My Son Go That He May Serve Me" (v21-23)

²¹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'*"

Israel is my son – my firstborn.

Let my son go that he may serve [worship] me.

What does it mean that Israel is the "son of God"?

Think back to Genesis 1.

In Genesis 1:27 God created man in his own image and likeness.

What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God?

Well, in Genesis 5:1-3, just as Adam was in the image of God,
so Seth was in the image of Adam.

To be in the image of God is to be the son of God.

Adam was created in the image of God.

In other words, Adam was created to look like God.

Adam was created to be a reflection of the holiness and righteousness of God.

God created him to participate in the fellowship and communion of the Trinity.

And Adam's fellowship and communion with God was expressed in a covenant.

Covenant is the way in which God adopts his children.

God tells Adam that in the day he eats

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will surely die.

Why didn't God say, that if you obey me you will live forever?

He didn't need to.

Adam was his son.

The son is the image and likeness of the father.

The son knows that he will receive the inheritance of his father.

The covenant with Adam is implicit in his very relationship as son to father.

If the son continues in the fellowship and communion of the father,
then he will receive the inheritance.

God gives only a warning: if you break covenant-if you disobey me,
if you fail to reflect my glory,

then you will die.

If you do not live like my son-then you will not receive the inheritance.
Or more precisely, you will inherit death from your new father-the devil.
(Recall how Jesus spoke in this fashion to the Pharisees-
you are of your father, the devil.
Why did he say this?
Because they were reflecting the devil in their lies.)

But here in Exodus 4, God is saying that Israel is his son – his firstborn –
because Israel is the heir of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God had promised Abraham an inheritance –
What were the three parts of the Abrahamic promise?
The Land, and the Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations.

God promises Abraham an inheritance
and as Paul tells us in Romans 4:13,
this inheritance was not merely a piece of real estate in the middle east,
but consisted of the whole world.

But God wants to make it clear that HE is the one who chooses his own son.
To be a firstborn according to the flesh is not sufficient.
Abraham had a son before Isaac
but Ishmael was born according to the flesh
and not according to the Spirit.
Therefore Isaac was chosen to continue the covenant blessing.
Likewise Isaac had two sons-and Esau was the firstborn;
But God chose Jacob to be His son.
Indeed God renamed Jacob "Israel"-which means "prince of God."
And when God spoke through Moses to Pharaoh,
saying "Israel is my son, my firstborn,"
He was claiming Jacob (and all who belonged to his house) as his son.

There is nothing that Israel did to earn or deserve this relationship.
God did not choose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because of their goodness.
God chose them out of his mere good pleasure.

And when God sent Moses to bring his people out of Egypt,
it was not because of the righteousness of the Israelites.
Rather, as Exodus 2:24 says:
"So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham,
with Isaac, and with Jacob."

God remembered his promises.

He remembered the covenant that he had made with his son.

And now he called to Pharaoh:

"Israel is my son, my firstborn.

So I say to you, let my son go, that he may serve me!"

Israel cannot live like the son of God so long as he is in bondage.

As long as the Israelites are slaves, they cannot serve God in the manner that he desires.

Because a son is supposed to serve his father-not a foreign king.

Indeed, the service that God requires from his son

is none other than the service of worship.

If being in the image of God is to be the son of God;

And if covenant is the way in which God adopts a son;

then service/worship is the response of the son to the father.

God calls Pharaoh to let Israel go,

so that Israel may sacrifice to Him in the wilderness.

The sticking point in the negotiations with Pharaoh

always comes back to the fact that God demands that

the whole of the congregation of Israel (not just the men)

sacrifice to him in the wilderness (not in Egypt).

Sure, it is plain to Pharaoh

that Moses *really* intends to lead the Israelites out of Egypt

never to return.

But in all the negotiations, that is never explicitly stated.

The point is that Israel is called to worship Yahweh,

in the place and in the manner that Yahweh has determined;

and so long as they serve Pharaoh they cannot serve God properly.

The son of God cannot serve two masters.

But Pharaoh is given a choice:

"But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn."

I used to see the Exodus narrative as a power contest between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt-
with Pharaoh as their embodiment.

Whose firstborn will die?

The firstborn of Yahweh?

or the firstborn of Pharaoh?

But the contest is *not* between equal parties.
It would be more accurate to see the LORD as the Great King
who is chastising a rebellious subordinate.
God never treats Pharaoh as an equal.
The gods of Egypt are never even referred to!

In this way, Moses gives Israel an example of how the prophets will speak to their own kings.

To illustrate the deadly seriousness of this,
and to remind the Israelites of their own covenant obligations,
God uses Moses himself as the case study (4:24-26).

c. Death and the Firstborn Son (v24-26)

²⁴ At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses'^[c] feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

Let me re-translate verses 24-26 for you
in a way that probably will communicate what is happening better.

“At a lodging place on the way the LORD met Moses’ firstborn – Gershom –
and sought to put him to death.
Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched his “feet” with it
and said, ‘Surely you are a blood relative.’”
So God let Gershom alone.
It was then that she said “blood relative” because of the circumcision.”

Verse 23 highlights the importance of the firstborn son.
Moses had not circumcised his son.
In Genesis 17, the LORD had told Abraham that the uncircumcised son
was cut off from God’s people.
Apparently Moses had failed to circumcise Gershom!

And judgment begins with the household of God.
Moses had been called to deliver Israel from Egypt,
and he could hardly fill the role if he himself was a covenant-breaker.

This emphasis on the firstborn is poignant in Exodus:
the whole point of the Passover is that those who do not have the blood
on the doorposts of their house,
will lose their firstborn.

In Ex 13:2, as God gives them the regulations for the Passover,
he tells them to "sanctify to me all the firstborn,
Whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel,
both of man and animal; it is Mine."
The firstborn belongs to God.
The firstborn of clean animals must be sacrificed,
the firstborn of humans must be redeemed through a sacrifice.

Indeed even our Lord himself, when he was born, had to be redeemed in this fashion.
This last week marked the 40th day after Christmas.
And in Luke 2:22-24, we are told that 40 days after his birth,
our Lord was brought to the temple
and his parents offered the sacrifice to redeem Jesus – their firstborn son.

Although he was the redeemer of all things,
yet because he took the form of sinful flesh he had to be redeemed.

He did not need to be redeemed from sin –
that is not the redemption of the firstborn!

Rather, Jesus Christ himself came as the true son of God.
He was all that Israel was supposed to be.
And so he relived the whole of Israel's history.
Hosea spoke of this when he said in Hosea 11:1
"When Israel was a child, I love him,
and out of Egypt I called my son."

Matthew takes a text that plainly referred to Israel, "out of Egypt I called my son"
And says that it is even more true of Jesus.
Jesus is the true Israel.
Therefore as the true Israel-as the true firstborn,
Jesus himself had to receive the redemption of the firstborn,
in order that he might succeed where Israel had failed.

In Galatians 3-4 Paul portrays the whole history of redemption as a history of the son of God.
The history of the Old Testament is the history of the son of God in his minority.

Israel was the son of God-the true heir of God;
But so long as he was a child, he was no better than a slave.
The law was a pedagogue-a servant employed to discipline the children.
But then in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son,
born of a woman (the promise of the seed of the woman)
born under the law so that he might redeem those under the law.

He is the faithful son-the true Firstborn Son of God,
who now has redeemed us that we might receive the adoption as sons.

He is the embodiment of Israel-the son of God *par excellence*.
Jesus is all that Israel was supposed to be.

Therefore, Paul says, all those who are baptized into Christ are sons of God
through faith in him.

You are Abraham's seed-according to the promise.
You have been adopted among the true sons of God,
You have been grafted into the true vine.

If Israel was the son of God in his minority,
Jesus is the Son of God come of age.
And if you are in Christ,
then you are also come of age.

All that Israel was supposed to be has come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament portrays the life of the church as life in the wilderness.

Like the Israelites of old,
we live between the great redemption from bondage
and the full reception of the inheritance.

We live in the wilderness.

But unlike the Israelites of old,
we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit-the presence of the risen Christ.

Therefore we have the deposit of the inheritance already with us.

Israel is my son-my firstborn; therefore I say, Let my son go!
The firstborn son now sits at the right hand of God.
And YOU have been seated with him in the heavenlies.

3. “You Shall Be as God to Him” – Moses and Aaron at the Mountain of God (v27-31)

²⁷ The LORD said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. ²⁸ And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do.

And so Moses and Aaron meet at the mountain of God.

Again, this is why we tend to think that Mt. Sinai (the mountain of God)
is at the bottom of the Sinai peninsula.

Because plainly Mt. Sinai is somewhere between Midian and Egypt.

And Aaron is fully on board with this mission and calling.

²⁹ *Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel.*

³⁰ *Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people.* ³¹ *And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.*

And our text concludes with the simple – but important – point
that the people believed –

“and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel
and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.”

The signs that Moses did were impressive.

A staff that turns into a serpent –

a hand that turns leprous – and then is restored –

water that is turned into blood –

the people see the signs – they hear the message –
and they believe.

If only it was that simple...