

Moses and Leadership: A Resource for Congregation Council Leadership Training

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I. Introduction

Moses as Leader of God's People: Why Might Moses Teach Us About Leadership?

Moses was remembered as one of the great leaders of God's people in the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Moses led Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He led them through forty years of wilderness wandering when resources were scarce and the people grumbled about Moses' leadership. In spite of all the hardships, grumbling and disobedience of God's people, by God's grace and mercy Moses led Israel to the edge of the promised land of Canaan. There Moses did two things. First of all, Moses wrote a book of instruction or *torah*, a kind of catechism of the essentials of the faith for a new generation of God's people to guide them in their future life in the land of Canaan (the commandments, stories, the song, and the sermons of Deuteronomy). Secondly, Moses commissioned a new leader named Joshua to lead God's people into the land of Canaan.

We will study briefly a few key texts involving Moses' leadership and consider ways in which his experiences may inform and shape our own understanding of leadership in communities of God's people today.

II. What Insights about Leadership Emerge from Moses' Early Life? Comparing and Contrasting Two Stories about Moses in Exodus 2:11-15 and Exodus 2:16-22. The biblical account of Moses' life begins with two episodes in his adult life as a young person:

a) Exodus 2:11-15. The setting is a young Moses who had been adopted out of his Israelite family by the daughter of Pharaoh and raised as an Egyptian prince while Moses' Hebrew people worked as slaves for Pharaoh (Exodus 2:1-10). Moses is grown up as an adult and is moved by seeing the suffering of his Hebrew people to do something on two successive days. [Ask for a volunteer to read the story aloud.]

b) Exodus 2:16-22. The setting is Moses as a fugitive from Pharaoh. He has fled Egypt and now living in a wilderness area called Midian and he encounters a group of wilderness-dwellers called Midianites. [Ask for another volunteer to read the story aloud.]

In small groups of 3-4, list as many similarities and differences (in kinds of actions, outcomes, characters, themes, settings, and the like) as you can between these two stories about Moses' early life. Assign a reporter from each group to report back. Consider these stories as early experiences of Moses trying to lead and get something done. After you have listed as many similarities and differences as you can in small groups, come together and list them on the board or on newsprint so everyone can see them.

As a whole group and in light of the lists of similarities and differences between the two texts, discuss what Moses might have learned about leadership from his experiences in these two stories. Consider the future stories of Moses, especially in Exodus and Numbers, when Moses will have to negotiate with Pharaoh (Exodus 7-13), when Pharaoh will seek to kill the Israelites (Exod 14:10-12), when Moses will lead Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 16-18), and when Moses has to deal with grumbling Israelite who do not support his leadership (Numbers 11-12). Are there any echoes of those future stories in these two early narratives from Moses' life in Exodus 2:11-15 and Exodus 2:16-22?

What do all these texts teach us about leadership of God's people? What life experiences, training, work or events that you have had earlier in your life might contribute to your role now as a leader in your congregation or community? In what ways?

Finally, focus on what Moses says in Exodus 2:22 as he names his son "Gershom" [the Hebrew word *ger* means "stranger/sojourner/alien"]: "I have been an alien [*ger*] residing in a foreign land." What foreign land is Moses talking about here? Does Moses' experience of being an alien and crossing boundaries among these various groups and people teach him anything about being a leader? What might it teach us about our leadership in a community of diverse interests, groups and perspectives?

III. Exodus 3:1-5: God's Call of Moses to Lead Israel Out of Slavery in Egypt

We now move to God's call to Moses to lead the Israelites out of their slavery to a future land of promise. God now appears as an actor in the story. [Ask another volunteer to read the conclusion to Exodus 2:23-25 outloud.] What moves or motivates God to act? What gets God's attention? How has that guided or how might that guide some of the ways in which we lead our own communities of faith in mission in our own communities?

God's response leads immediately to God's calling of a human leader to be an agent of God's work in the world, namely, Moses. [Ask another volunteer to read Exodus 3:1-5.]

God appears to Moses "at the mountain of God" hidden or veiled in the form of a burning bush that never burned out. What does these images of a mountain and an unquenchable fire, images often associated with God in the Bible, convey in terms of the character and qualities of God as God calls Moses to be a leader? What might that mean in terms of your own leadership in God's service today?

God instructs Moses to "remove the sandals of your feet because you are standing on holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). In the ancient world, removing your sandals in a place of worship or other sacred space was a way of showing honor and respect. But the custom of removing your sandals was also something done when you came home and entered someone else's home. Earlier in Exodus 2:22, Moses had described himself, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land." In light of the preceding stories, there is a sense in which Moses was not at home in any land, nation or people. The Hebrew slaves whom Moses tried to help in solving a dispute rejected Moses as not being one of them Exodus 2:13-14). The Egyptian Pharaoh had chased him out of Egypt (Exodus 2:15). The Midianites into whose family Moses married regarded him as an Egyptian (Exodus 2:19). Moses was seemingly "at home" nowhere. As often happens, those who lead must live and work by crossing boundaries among different groups and identities and interests, working for the sake of the larger whole rather than for just one interest or group.

Leaders thereby become bridges between individual and sub-groups within the community, but they may not feel completely “at home” anywhere or with any one part of the community. That may have its advantages, but it can also be uncomfortable.

What does it mean to Moses, as he removes his sandals, that to be here at the mountain of God, he has at last found a true home, a base of support, a sense of belonging? What might be implications for your own work as a leader/bridge person/crosser of boundaries/alien and sojourner? How do you find your center, your home with God in terms of worship, study of Scripture, prayer or other means? How do we as leaders tap into the unquenchable fire of God’s presence and power so that we allow God, as much as possible, to lead through us rather than we leading others on our own?

IV. Exodus 3:1 and the Biblical Image of Shepherd as Leader

Moses was a shepherd leading sheep out in the wilderness when God called him to take on another task of leadership in bringing Israel out of the slavery of Egypt (Exodus 3:1). Presumably, Moses thought that being a shepherd is what he would be doing for the rest of his life. But God has another calling or vocation for him. Interestingly, the image of the “shepherd” is a common image or metaphor for a leader in the Bible and among the ancient cultures around Israel. Kings were often called “shepherds.” As a young boy, the great King David was a shepherd (1 Samuel 16:6-13). As a Ruler over Israel and all nations, God is often addressed as “the Shepherd of Israel” (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 8:1, Psalm 21:1). Among human rulers, sometimes there were good shepherds, and sometimes there were very bad shepherds or rulers. What would make a good shepherd who tends their flock of sheep well? In what way might that be similar to what would make a good ruler or leader of human communities? [Ask a volunteer to read in the New Testament Gospel of John, chapter 10:11-18] In John 10, on the night before his death on the cross Jesus was teaching his disciples about their future life together after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus uses this Old Testament image of “shepherd” to describe himself and what makes a good shepherd versus a bad shepherd. What are the qualities of Jesus as “the Good Shepherd”?

At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus commissions or calls one of his disciples to “feed my sheep.” [Have a volunteer read John 21:15-19.] Earlier in John’s Gospel, Peter had denied even knowing Jesus not once but three times when Jesus was arrested and executed on the cross by the Roman authorities (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Like the other disciples, Peter had abandoned Jesus at his moment of greatest need. Now at the end of John’s Gospel, the resurrected Jesus has come back and appeared to the disciples and now calls Peter to be a kind of “hired hand” for Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus calls Peter, in spite of his earlier failings and lack of faith, to “feed my sheep.” Jesus asks Peter three times “Do you love me?” as a way, in a sense, of repairing the broken relationship between Jesus and Peter which happened with Peter’s earlier triple denial of Jesus during Jesus’ trial. And after Peter affirms that he loves Jesus, Jesus calls Peter to “tend my sheep” or “feed my sheep.” Jesus remains the overseer, the Good Shepherd, but Peter now has a role to play as helping Jesus tend or feed his flock, the new community of

followers of the Resurrected Christ who will be present now in a new way through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit as God works among human communities of faith and leaders of those communities like you.

V. Exodus 18:13-27—What Does a Midianite (Not an Israelite) Priest and Father-in-Law of Moses Teach Moses and Us about Leadership?

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, comes to visit Moses once he has led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness. The Israelite community is a very large community, and Moses spends all day trying to settle disputes among the thousands of Israelites who are traveling with him in the harsh conditions of the desert. Jethro, a Midianite priest and outsider, gives Moses some advice. [Read Exodus 18:13-27 as a group dramatic reading. Assign the following parts of the reading to different people: narrator, Jethro, and Moses.]

What implications for leadership in the church would you draw from this story in Exodus 18?

VI. A Story of Two Leaders: Moses Versus Aaron in the Golden Calf Story in Exodus 32:1-24.

After Moses had led Israel out of Egypt and traveled for a time in the wilderness, they came to Mount Sinai. Moses went up this mountain, met God and received from him the Ten Commandments which God also spoke orally to all the people. The Israelites had agreed to obey God's commandments which began with the first and most important commands "not to have any other gods before me" and "not to make for yourself an idol" and bow down to it (Exodus 20:3-4; 24:3). But the first thing the Israelites do while Moses remains on top of Mount Sinai is to build a golden calf and worship it. The story of the golden calf is the story of two different kinds of human leaders. Moses and Aaron are related as brothers and co-leaders of Israel in their wilderness journey, but they display very different forms of leadership in this narrative. [Read Exodus 32:1-24 as a group dramatic reading, assigning the following roles to individual readers: narrator, Moses, God, Aaron, Joshua (verse 17 only), and "the people" can be the rest of the group reading together.]

What qualities, strategies and style of leadership does Moses display at the various points of the story? What qualities and styles of leadership does Aaron display? What might we learn about leadership for ourselves today from this story?