

God Helps Moses With Stress (Numbers 11:4-31, Galatians 6:1-3, Luke 9:1-6)

Let us pray. Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I once saw a list of professions ranked according to the degree of stress that can be found in that vocation. I looked for "minister." It wasn't there. I assumed there must be a mistake, so I looked under "clergy." It wasn't there, either. I looked under "pastor," and "priest." Not there. Later somebody told me that, as a matter of fact, ministry is considered one of the least stressful vocations.

The fact of the matter is, everybody thinks that his or her job is a stressful job. Nobody likes to think that they have an easy time of it. I remember a cartoon: big office, huge desk, a CEO type sitting behind the desk. In front of the desk there's a little man in work clothes, his hat in his hand. He is saying to the CEO, "If it is any comfort, sir, it is lonely at the bottom, too."

You ask anybody, "How's your work going?", and they will tell you about some stress point. Even if your job is just sitting in a chair doing nothing all day long, you will find something to worry about. And let's face it in this economy and during these hard times there is a lot to be stressed out about. There is work, school, wondering what the future holds for us, feeling as though we are carrying the burden of the world on our shoulders, bills, the list of stresses goes on and on.

Everybody know what stress means. Which is why I was delighted to discover this scene in the Book of Numbers 11:4-31, our Old Testament lesson for this morning, which reveals that Moses suffered stress on his job. It is a great story. It is surprising that Moses, of all people, would feel stressed out. But that is what is so great about the Bible. It has real people in it. The Bible does not hide the fact that the heroes and heroines of our faith are real human beings, like you and me.

A part of Moses' problem, I would guess, was that he felt ill-prepared for what God called him to do. Moses in fact tries to tell God that he is ill-prepared to do this several times. Moses tells God that he is not a good speaker, the people might not believe him, or might not listen to him. To each response God says for Moses to do it anyway. So Moses did it and hung in there all the way up to the end. I think that this part is there to let us know that if Moses could do it then we can probably make it too.

So here is Moses. He wanted to settle down in Midian with his wife Zipporah and be a sheep farmer. God however had other plans for Moses. God wanted Moses to go to Pharaoh and persuade him to release God's people. God wanted Moses to lead God's people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, into the Sinai desert, and finally into the Promised Land. Everything went wrong along the way. First of all, they kept on getting lost. They must have been going around in circles. That is the only way you can explain how it took forty years to go across the Sinai desert. Moses' wife Zipporah, said it took 40 years because Moses would never stop to ask for directions. Second, they ran out of food. So, God had to give them something called manna to eat.

The Israelites got lost, they ran out of food, and then they started to complain. This is where the older testament text read to you earlier picks up the story. The people would plead with Moses. At night Moses would hear them crying, saying "We were better off in Egypt as slaves than we are now free and wandering around lost in this desert."

Finally Moses, stressed out, had it up to here. He complains to God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let them see my misery" (Numbers 11: 11-15). Moses is basically saying to God I've had enough. I'm stressed to the breaking point. You finish this. I remember Senator Alan Simpson said once, "Up in Wyoming we have more cattle than people. We like it that way." That must have been the way Moses felt, only he had sheep, not cattle. He found it easier to shepherd sheep than to shepherd people. Moses said to God, "I don't need this. Do something."

That brings us to our text. God said to Moses, "Take seventy of the elders and go to the tent of meeting, and I will meet you there. I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so you will not have to bear it by yourself alone." By doing this God helps Moses with his stress. God also helps Moses out with his stress by providing meat for the Israelites who have been complaining about wanting meat to eat.

What an amazing passage. First of all just for its practical advice. Stress is the result of carrying too much weight in your life. Just ask an engineer, they can tell you about that. You put too much stress on a member, and you will soon see "stress fractures."

Jesus knew this. This is why Jesus didn't embark on his mission all by himself. Jesus knew that carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders wasn't healthy. So what did he do? Jesus sought out help. He recruited the twelve disciples to help him bear the burden of God's mission which had been entrusted to him. Jesus "called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:1-2).

Do you think the writers of these scriptures are actually trying to tell us something today? Could it be that these examples are God's way of trying to show us the importance of bearing the burdens of others? If we have eyes to see, we can find stories like this still going on all around us. Yes, there are wonderful illustrations of that to be found daily. Examples that could move and inspire us to act.

I came across one not too long ago about a teacher teaching in the lower east side in New York, in a neighborhood where education can hardly take place. Where there is high crime, drugs, delinquency, and homes that don't take responsibility for children. Yet this teacher, named Jessica Siegel, has been tremendously successful with high school students. She teaches English. She teaches these kids the great classics of western civilization. Irving Howe wrote about this teacher, how she had overcome all the difficulties and given the children hope to take up the responsibilities of becoming adults in this society. Howe asked, "How did she do this?" He recognized that we'll probably never really know, because good teaching is a gift and, therefore, there is a dimension of mystery to it. We don't know how it happens, but, he said, there is a clue. He quoted a student in her class, named Carlos, who said, "I have never known such concern for me from anybody else." Her caring for him, her paying attention to him, her treating him as an important human being, her bearing his burden with him, transformed his life, and probably, given the context of that neighborhood, saved his life.

Paul states quite clearly in Galatians that it is our duty as Christians do bear the burden of others. This is shown when Paul says, "My friends if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a

spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

My friends, as a church family, we are suppose to be a community. Part of what it means to be a community is to bear each other's burdens. When we see someone stressed out, hurting, or struggling, we as a community should do whatever we can to help relieve them of that stress, to help relieve them of that hurt, and to help relieve them of that struggle.

I close today's sermon with a story. Dan Wakefield is a journalist, who stayed away from the church all of his adult life. He was sitting in a bar on Christmas Eve. Somebody suggested, "Why don't we go to the candlelight service at a church." So they went to King's Chapel, to the midnight service on Christmas Eve. It changed his life. That experience brought him back to the Church. He said that he was amazed at what he found in the church. I remember C. S. Lewis, before his conversion, said he stayed away from church because he discovered that the people who were there on Sunday were the ones he had been trying to avoid all week long. But Wakefield experienced just the opposite.

When he got to church, he discovered the people there were people he admired. He was especially impressed with the activities in the church. He went on a weekend retreat. He said there was a man there who wasn't a member of the church. He had just recently come, nobody really knew him. But it became apparent quickly that he was in the grip of a very painful, personal problem because of a divorce in his family. Wakefield said, "Most of us tried to avoid him. I did, unconsciously, just try to keep away, because I sensed, it is almost like it emanated from him, that he was having these terrible problems." He said that at the end of the retreat he noticed that the man was standing by himself. But then another man went up to him, smiling, and said how great it had been to have him there as a part of the retreat that weekend. Wakefield said, "I said to myself, 'Are you kidding. He is a real downer.'" Then the man said, "Maybe we could get together for lunch when we get back to the city, that is, if you have the time?" Wakefield again thought to himself, "No one wants to have lunch with this guy, he's a loser." Wakefield wrote, "I saw the expression on the man's face. I saw the look that came on his face when he was asked to have lunch, followed by the realization that he was wanted, that somebody was really interested in him and desired his company." Then he wrote, "It was a face transformed by a single act of kindness." That is all it took.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Amen.

-- Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 28, 2010