

What Authority?

Exodus 3:1-15

Matthew 16:21-28

Romans 12

A famous painting depicts three wild-eyed musicians walking into the carnage of war. There is an older, skinny long grey-haired drummer in the center, staring intently into the fog of war. On one side stands a small boy drummer eyes fixated on the old man. On the other side is a bandana-wearing flutist staring straight ahead.

The mixture of courage, doubt, and fear in their eyes reminds me of our Old Testament story of Moses looking at the burning bush. The musicians and Moses both look trapped in mission impossible.

At the outset, notice: Moses is much more than a man from Midian. He is God's chosen liberator, but he doesn't think he has any authority. All the responsibility, but no authority. Some of you might feel that way: powerless and not in control. No authority.

If a sign has feelings, the NO LEFT TURN sign at Second and Main feels abused because people turn left with reckless abandon. No matter if you shout, "Praise the Lord," they turn left. "Don't tell me what to do." We are all the children of John Stuart Mill and his principle of freedom from social interference.^{[1][i]} Baptists are especially attracted because we have challenged the authority of kings and popes. What we miss is that we have over-invested in a secular philosophy that contradicts the Gospel of Jesus. But freedom to do as we please is hard to resist isn't it?

Moses turns aside to see the burning bush – at first only curious, an absent-minded tourist. God has to do something to get attention. After all, Moses has profits to turn, and the liberation of a people from slavery is not a profitable business. It is hard to get the attention of someone whose mind is littered with work. God gets Moses' attention because the liberation of people from oppression is more important business than counting sheep, tending sheep, and shearing sheep; more important than tax shelters, tax loopholes, tax dodges, tax anxiety; more important than the Dow Jones, gross domestic product, and the national debt.

The bush burns but is not consumed like an eternal flame showing God's stubborn determination to have us know God. And the bush is still burning; God is still calling people. If skeptical of this claim we can remember that

God confined God's self in a human body hanging on a tree while wearing a crown of thorns. "Follow me," he asks.

God calls Moses to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that he can no longer oppress God's people. Pharaoh has to find another way to stimulate his economy instead of on the backs of the working men and women of Israel. The cheap labor supply is about to dry up. Thinking that the bottom line is more important than how you treat folks is about to go out of style. But Moses knows that if he shows up and claims the leader's mantle, the Israelites will doubt his authority. Moses faces what we all face, especially in church, **a crisis of authority**.

So what happened? God tells Moses tell Pharaoh, "I am that I am." Name-dropping in the palace may get you an appointment or a lunch, but liberation? Not likely. A NAME? WE NEED MORE AUTHORITY THAN THAT. Imagine going to Egypt with nothing to commend himself to the power of the throne of Egypt but "I am who I am" has sent me to tell you, "Let my people go."

God's name is YHWH, but it is a name Israel could not say. Shouldn't the refusal of the Jews to even speak the holy name at least teach us to be more careful about our loose talk about God? Any attempt to monopolize the name of God is an act of coercive authority. We are not in charge of God.

More than ever before, we need to know that we don't control God. Preachers with all their color charts about the end of the world are not in charge. They are like the Wizard of Oz, the man behind the curtain blowing smoke and fooling people.

Many Christians believe they can speak with certainty about what God supports or God opposes. Christians have turned God into a garden variety politician, with membership in special interest groups, instead of **Ruler of the Universe**. God is not bound by the Constitution of the United States of America, a vote of the Southern Baptist Convention, or the decrees of the Pope in Rome. At the funeral of Louis XIV the Great, thousands heard the preacher, Massillon (Mass-ee-lon), "**Only God is great!**" (An Ohio city is named for him.)

Moses, to his credit, argues against the call. It's the inability to trust the "doesn't look like much to me" authority of God. The argument is so intense, that the writer of Exodus, shortly after Moses is on his way to Egypt, puts this line: "**On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him.**" I have no idea what that means, but the call of God **is** a matter of life and death. And you are right to **contest** it before you **accept** it.

Finally, a convinced Moses accepts the call: **“Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand”** (Exodus 4: 20). Does this look anything at all like Operation Freedom?

But the arguing over authority never stops. Indeed, in community, authority is always in negotiation, never fixed forever. The Israelites were not even out of Egypt before they turned on Moses: **“We told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”**

They murmur when there is no water to drink and no bread to eat. Moses is late for church one Sunday and the people get the associate pastor to make them a golden calf to worship. God feeds them manna and they complain there’s no meat. A litany of whining: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us with **thirst/with hunger?**” The Israelites contest the authority of Moses at every turn.

Moses argues with the Lord, **“What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” “These are not my people; I’m not their mother.”** God says, **“Well, they are not my people.”**

No wonder churches are always trying to prop up the authority of God. The authority of God looks like a rag doll. A man riding on a donkey with a staff in his hand to face the army of Egypt? A man riding on a donkey into Jerusalem, hanging on a cross and calling it authority looks as foolish as Yankee Doodle Dandy. No wonder Peter cries, **“God forbid it!”**

What would we do with more authority if we had it? Will Campbell once lamented, “We just can’t quite trust the power of the Gospel message. There just must be something we can add, some gimmick, some technique, some strategy.”^{[ii][ii]} Whenever we ground the authority of Jesus on some other authority we make that other authority more fundamental than Jesus. There’s nothing more fundamental than Jesus, and what God is doing in Jesus. As Robert Jenson, in *Systematic Theology*, says, **“God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.”**^{[iii][iii]}

Well, the sending of Moses turns out to be God’s way in the world. Jesus sends out his followers, two by two, like lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money, food, or provision for the journey. Our staff is a cross on our shoulders and the word of God on our lips. Authority is always proximate. James McClendon says, **“To be proximate is to be ‘next to.’** Each of us is called to stand next to Christ – “fools for Christ’s sake”; to embrace the comic frame, where reality is different. Once we get on the

donkey, so to speak, and go back to Egypt to rescue the oppressed, we are living in folly; all the hierarchical authority in the world is overturned as Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrates in his work on carnival and the ancient Feast of Fools. Carnival was satire and temporary suspension of the harsh reality of peasant life. The cross is permanent reversal of worldly authority. In the eyes of the world Christians are carnival workers. So no wonder we, like Peter, refuse to embrace the folly of the cross. Folly sees that power comes through weakness, strength through vulnerability, and wisdom through ignorance. Our authority is the word of folly – Christ crucified. All our efforts to avoid this central meaning of the cross fail as Peter failed in his attempt to persuade Jesus to give up the cross. Too often we conform the church to the dominant assumptions of our age, even though they are totally unchristian. Why? Because we want to belong, to fit in, to be like everyone else. The world laughs and we cringe. We are God’s “carnies” – carnival barkers – and we have a hard time accepting our call. We are goaded by the spirit of hierarchy,” as Kenneth Burke puts it.^[iv]^[iv] We think we need a ladder to climb, a world to conquer, a trophy in a case. We think we need a pat on the back and the approval of the world, but we don’t. Don’t let the world determine your status, your place. You don’t have to be in the Top 100.

There’s a different kind of authority and you have it. You have all the authority in the world. The people I look up to are not playing in the NFL this year or coaching in the college ranks or making a billion dollars a year. The people I look up to are not starring in movies, and certainly not serving in the carnival we call Congress. You are right here in First Baptist Church. You are Jesus for me because you have the authority of truth: there’s a person who never shouts, never exaggerates, but simply lets her quiet yes be yes and her quiet no be no. A colleague who was deeply hurt by a friend and yet said, “I’m not going to let the bitterness of this injury determine the shape of my future life.” A woman who simply listens to people for as long as it takes for them to find the sense in their troubled lives. A teacher who keeps going in a troubled school because she knows whatever it is these children need, education has to be a big part of it. A woman who keeps defending the poor and the oppressed and the prisoners. Those of you who provide for the needs of the needy among us, who teach little children year after year and welcome them into Sunday School as Jesus welcomed them, who work every day to make a difference in our world full of problems, the people who show up, who keep fighting intractable, seemingly unsolvable problems in education, politics, and life and maintain your spiritual zeal. You are Jesus for me, because you have the authority of Jesus in your heart.

Now, do you see? Gather up the images: a shepherd's staff, a donkey, the word of a preacher, a cross, a feast of fools, carnival workers, lambs among wolves – all foolishness to the world but I'm telling you First Baptist Church Dayton has all the authority we will ever need in this city – the authority of the God who **raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt**. It will outlast all the hierarchy in this world. So "gird up your loins, mount your donkey, and go back to Egypt (which is wherever there is oppression) – we are a feast of fools to the world. We can trust Paul's benediction in II Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

[\[i\]](#) [i] John Stuart Mill argued that freedom from social interference would create the strong individuals who in turn would create strong communities. This is one of the secular principles by which many Americans live and is at the root of much anti-government rhetoric.

[\[ii\]](#) [ii] Will D. Campbell and Richard C. Goode, *Crashing the Idols: The Vocation of Will D. Campbell* (and any other Christian for that matter), 27.

[\[iii\]](#) [iii] Quoted in Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*, 79.

[\[iv\]](#) [iv] Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* (1963-64), 491-514.