

It is difficult for me to read this story about Moses and the Burning Bush without picturing Moses as a young Charlton Heston, bold, strong and the epitome of the hero chosen by God to do what no other man could do, deliver Israel out of Egypt. So, to prepare for this sermon on this passage from Exodus, I watched this scene as it was interpreted in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic movie, the Ten Commandments. For those of you not familiar with this movie, it is a dramatic telling of the life of Moses, who in his young adulthood as an adopted Egyptian prince becomes aware that he is the biological child of an enslaved Hebrew woman. As a result, Moses suffers an identity crisis. Some of you may be more familiar with the Dreamworks animated musical drama, The Prince of Egypt, which was based on the Ten Commandments more than the book of Exodus. <sup>by the way</sup> In both movies, Moses once he learns about the circumstances of his birth, desires to free his people from oppression, but as a youth, he acts brashly and kills an Egyptian soldier to protect a Hebrew man. In the movie the Ten Commandments, Moses is then banished by his jealous Egyptian brother Rameses and flees to the wilderness where he creates a quiet unassuming life for himself as a

shepherd and family man far from his ~~from both his~~ adopted family, his family of origin and his destiny.

This is where the story of the burning bush comes in. Moses is going about his day working for his father-in-law, Jethro, when he wanders a bit too far and ends up on the Mountain of God. In our movie versions, God, himself, speaks to Moses from the burning bush to remind him of his destiny, his hero's journey. I found it interesting that in both Cecil de Mille's and the DreamWorks version of this story, Moses and God are played by the same person. Charlton Heston is the voice of God in the Ten Commandments and Van Kilmer is the voice of both Moses and God in the Prince of Egypt. Interesting! I wondered if this was intended to portray Moses as a more than human being, almost on par with God. I also found it telling how Moses is portrayed in these two movies in contrast to who he is in our Scripture reading for today. Charlton Heston, unlike Moses, is a bit surly with God. When God calls to Moses from the bush, instructs him to remove his sandals and tells him that He is the God of his ancestors, Moses replies with, well then, if

you are their God “why do you not hear the cries of their children in the bondage of Egypt?” In response, Charleton Heston, as God’s deep <sup>again</sup> baritone voice, answers, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt and I have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. Therefore, I will send thee, Moses, unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring my people out of Egypt.”

Hollywood’s depiction of Moses is consistent with what Joseph Campbell, an American writer and educator who specialized in comparative mythology and religion calls the myth of the hero, or the hero’s journey. Campbell describes the plot as such, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.” The hero emerges from his adventure transformed and more powerful than he was before. Campbell recognized the power of these myths not only in movies and literature but also “in the working out of the plot of *our own lives*.” He describes

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the hero's journey as a monomyth: an archetypal story that informs us of what we collectively value. To take part in the hero's journey, you give up where or who you are, embrace some new adventure often reluctantly, and then return to normal life, changed for the better in some miraculous way. The book of Exodus then is a story about Moses' transformation in the wilderness from reluctant shepherd to the deliverer of Israel out of Egypt, our hero.

Hmm... I wonder. Is this the Moses we see in the Exodus story? Is the Exodus story even about Moses? Let's take a look. In the book of Exodus (its not called the book of Moses by the way) when God reveals Godself as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," Moses hides his face, for he was so in awe of God that he was afraid to look at God. With no response from Moses, God continues and says, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." And

how does Moses respond? He asks as any reluctant hero would ask, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” However, unlike the mythical hero that Joseph Campbell identified, God doesn’t point out Moses hero abilities or that he will be transformed into the man God meant him to be. God does not reassure Moses of his own competence but instead responds with something even more powerful, the reassurance that God is truly present and cares about those God loves. God’s sole concern is with the liberation of Israel from oppression when God says, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” This statement sounds like the hero’s journey but interestingly, when God says “I will be with you”, the “you” is singular. However, When God says “you shall worship God on this mountain” the “you” is plural. God isn’t telling the hero Moses that he will come to his journey’s end on this mountain, but that God will deliver God’s people out of Egypt and will be their God, their deliverer because God has heard their cries.

Cindy Lee in her book titled, *Our Unforming, De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation*, points out that in the West what counts as spiritual growth (what God is calling us to from our own burning bush) is often associated with the hero's individual journey and not our dependence on God, creation and one another. The consequence of this individualism she writes is that it "naturally creates an independent faith. We think religious beliefs are determined by one's individual and private decision. Spiritual formation becomes one's personal process of growth and rest." In individualistic cultures, the self is the center, and even practices of community are determined by one's own needs. Community is optional and based on convenience" or how much we personally gain from the experience of communal worship. When the individual is the focus of concern, she goes on to state, this privatized spirituality is left unprepared and without a compass to know how best to respond to the cries of God's people that God hears and calls upon us to act.

In contrast to individualism, Lee argues that "Dependence is where the spiritual life begins; we realize that we can't rely on our own efforts,

but we need God, creation, and community to thrive or even survive. We cannot form a sustainable spirituality through our own strong wills. We need a power outside of our own.” The Moses of Scripture chose his hero’s journey not for his own edification but because he recognized his dependence on God and the communities he left behind in Egypt. He saw and heard with God’s help their cries as his own in the bush that burned but was not consumed and he agreed to bring these cries to Pharaoh to remind him that both Egyptian and Hebrew are dependent on the God who sees, hears and acts.

I wonder, have you seen any bushes burning but not consumed at St. Bartholomew’s recently? Have you heard God’s voice telling you, singular or plural, to respond to the cries God is hearing coming from our community and nation? Do you know that God is the Great I am, ever present and eager to save? I want to end with an exercise Lee suggests in her book that views our emotions, both the joys and the sorrows, as a collective prayer. I will read her words as a meditation and a prayer that I encourage you to pray on as well. Lee states, “Whenever I

notice a strong emotional reaction in myself, I stop to ask, Is it my own, someone else's, or is it collective? If it's my own emotion, then I attend to my needs. If it's someone else's, then I ask, Whose? Then I might reach out to check in. If it's a collective emotion, then I ask, What's happening in our community or society right now? By intentionally stopping to feel and embrace the emotion, we can connect to our collective spirit. When we carry these emotions together, we are expressing that the injustices experienced in other parts of our community or nation are not other people's problems but actually our problems... Whenever we feel overwhelmed by the violence and injustices of our world, a communal contemplative practice we can engage in together is to take a moment to enter our space of prayer, take a few deep breaths, then intentionally feel our collective emotions. We might ask ourselves, What does that emotion tell us about our whole, and how do we take care of our collective?"

How do we respond to the misery and cries that God has called to us to hear? Are we collectively ready to say, "Here WE are"?

