

Exodus 4: 18-21; 27-31

Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, 'Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.' The Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.' So 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.

And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

The Lord said to Aaron, 'Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.' So he went; and he met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him, and all the signs with which he had charged him. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

Today's our last look at Exodus.

We've come full circle around the hero's journey - here he is, changed, beginning again.

A few weeks ago we met Moses far beyond the wilderness, where he had an encounter with the Divine.

A conversation between God and Moses that continued up until our reading today.

There we found Moses at the bush that was burning and yet not consumed, where he stopped, turned with a curious attention and opened to something new, something unknown.

It's there that Moses heard his name, heard his name being called, and he replied "Here I am" Ex. 3:4 (*Hineni*).

There at the burning bush, Moses simply said "Hineni" Here I am.

Hineni is a rich word, with many layers. In Hebrew Hineni says, "I am here to listen to whatever the caller (God) has to say, but I do not yet know what the caller (God) wants from me."¹

I am here to listen, not yet knowing what the One who Calls wants from me. Hineni.

¹ <http://www.jewishchronicle.org/2014/11/30/hineni-here-i-am-and-i-am-here-are-different/>

Moses heard the call, then had all sorts of reasons why he wasn't up to the call. Lots of backtracking, but, but, but, no, not me.

And so here we are. Moses has moved through that refusal and is on his way.

Our scripture today starts out: Moses went back...Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, 'Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.'

What happened to Moses? His last utterance to God, just verses before was "Oh my Lord, please send someone else" (Ex. 4: 13)

As Moses traveled home, away from the burning bush, that encounter with the Divine, back to his family, back to the life he knew, something must have shifted - he was again able to hold the attitude of Hineni. Here I am. I am here.

Here to listen, and to follow, whatever God has in store for me, even if I don't yet understand what that involves.

Hineni.

Moses' has come full circle on this revolution of the Hero's journey. He returns to the ordinary world. Moses went back to his father in law, our scripture reads. He went back. Yet this is a different Moses than the one that Jethro sent out to tend the sheep.

Jethro must have sensed that shift, giving Moses his blessing to go. To go back.

And off they go, on another long journey, back to Egypt. This trek of weeks, maybe months, back to another home. The journey begins again, with Moses carrying the staff of God in his hand. Moses holds a new power now, one not his own.

Somewhere along the way, God has a few more instructions for Moses, saying: 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.'

See that you perform all the wonders I have put in your power.

That word wonders is one worth considering, "wonders" (in Hebrew *mo-faith*) - this is the first time it's used here in this story, different from the signs Moses has been given up to now. He has signs, but he is to do wonders. This word *Mo-faith*, *wonders*, refers to extraordinary deeds that intrude upon our settled, controlled life and generate new possibilities. *Mo-faith* refers to an intrusion into our controlled lives.

Moses hasn't been instructed about the wonders that are in him, in his power to perform. He will discover a power in himself that is new.

What wonders live inside of us; that go beyond these controlled lives of ours?

The mention of 'wonders', evokes the first mention of God's resolve to 'harden the heart' of Pharaoh. The juxtaposition is striking. God does wonders that shatter all present reality, but God also sponsors resistance to the newness of behalf of the status quo - the status quo being the way things have been done - slavery in Egypt led by Pharaoh.

God is about to do a new thing - a wondrous thing, shattering reality, AND... and this newness will be met with incredible resistance.²

That's the reality of the journey, our journey, isn't it?

A new wondrous thing is born - an idea, a project, a possibility - and there's all kinds of resistance towards it.

I've told parts of this story before - but I think it has something to add to this idea of possibility and resistance as well-

It's about 5 years ago now that my Spiritual Director asked me a question that changed my life. In our conversation that day, I had returned again to my feeling burned out, restless in my work, dreaming of taking a leave of absence and going away, to the wilderness. But... and there were plenty of buts. But I needed to do this and that, and finish this project and... Lots of resistance to any real change. After listening to my laundry list of resistance, she finally asked 'Kate, are you wasting your life?' Are you wasting your life, waiting until later to follow the summons of the Spirit? She encouraged me to face the resistance within, and make space for God's new thing, whatever it might be. A half year after that fateful conversation, I had worked out details and was planning a month-long silent retreat in rural Wisconsin - heading into unknown territory - physically and metaphorically. I was terrified.

Our journeys, all of our journeys, large and small, external and internal, are peppered with wonders - God's wonders - that live inside of us, and right next to those wonders is a resistance to that New Thing that nudges and beckons.

We've seen that in Moses along the way.

In today's scripture, off Moses goes, he meets up with his brother, Aaron, fills him in on the signs, and together, they head back to Egypt, where they meet with the elders of the Israelites. Moses and Aaron speak, show the signs the Lord has given them, and we're told:

The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

² from New Interpreters' Bible Commentary, Vol. 1, p 310-314

They believed. They saw signs and believed, but it was the hearing that the Lord had heard them - heard their call, heard their cries, their groaning, had seen their misery - when they heard that the Lord was paying attention, they bowed down and worshiped.

Hineni...mo-faith... 'Here I am' leads to Moses being given extraordinary wonders to perform. It started with saying 'yes', Here I Am. And a power outside of his own doing; a power he didn't understand, was with him. Saying yes and in that clarity of moving ahead, meeting resistance. That's the dance of our journey.

Psychologist James Hollis names it slightly differently, saying that we live into this reality every day, that each morning the twin gremlins of fear and lethargy sit at the foot of our bed and smirk. Fear of what beckons us, fear of the unknown, fear of the challenge of leaving our small understandings behind. Those fears intimidate us, pushing us back into our convenient rituals, conventional thinking, and familiar surroundings. Fear on the one side, and... On the other front, lethargy seduces us with whispers of - kick back, chill out, numb out, take it easy for a while...³

Fear and lethargy - they tempt us to stay in the safety of the status quo, the known. Our calling, the summons of a life centered in God, that summons asks us to meet the threats and unknowns. To risk, to lean in and say Hineni.

Although I didn't know it when I was hammering out the details of that month in silence, but in the midst of planning time away from my hospital chaplaincy work, right before I left - literally 3 days before I packed the car and headed west, I was offered a New Thing. A call to come serve as pastor here, at UMC. I told Kathleen, and others on the search committee, that I couldn't give an answer until I returned. If they needed to move ahead with the search without me, so be it. I needed that time in the wilderness, time to be quiet with God. Time to risk being changed and come back different.

It was on the return journey that I was able to give a wholehearted 'yes'. Here I am.

Saying Hineni, saying here I am, requires a sort of death, a letting go of the status quo of our everyday lives. And it requires listening; A deep listening for the stirring of God.

And what potential it holds; what life it brings!

Moses, now with his brother Aaron, was back in Egypt, with the people. The people believed, not only believed, but they worshiped - they dedicated themselves to the God who hears.

³ Hollis, James.2005. *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*. Avery Publishing.

Their journey, as a people, was just beginning. Into the wilderness they would go, but not before seeing signs of wonder - of God's disruptive power. Seeing wonders and living through a boat load of resistance.

Their story is our story. A people trying to find our way forward on this journey of life - through the unknowns and resistances before us.

May we each turn to the God who made us all, saying Hineni. Here I am.