

“Sheep Tending, Soul Mending, Feet Sending”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Outdoor Worship

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Everyone loves an underdog. Rosie was a Pitbull, who at about 3 years old, a stray who ended up in a Nebraska shelter. As the shelter staff was trying to work with her, to do some basic training and get her ready for a new home, they realized she wasn't responding to vocal commands. It turns out, she could not hear the commands to sit, to stay, to heel. She couldn't recognize the name she was given. At that point, some might have given up on Rosie, who did not have the cuteness of puppyhood to win a dog-hungry family over. But once they realized Rosie was deaf, the staff taught her sign language, and she quickly caught on. They all became invested in Rosie's success and in her finding a loving, forever home. They watched her change from being a fearful creature who didn't like to play, to someone who learned how to enjoy being a dog.

In time, a woman named Cindy contacted the shelter. Cindy, who is deaf, had always wanted a deaf dog. She and her family bonded immediately with Rosie, and together they have made a new, silent language of their own and have made each other's life better. Reading this story, I found myself rooting for Rosie, and eager to see her come to a joyful ending.

The calling of Moses to lead the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom is an underdog story, and we find ourselves rooting for him. We had already become invested in Moses; our hearts had wrapped around him last week as we heard how he, as an infant, had been destined to death by Pharaoh, but thanks to some daring women, his life was spared. As an ironic twist, he ended up growing up in the house of Pharaoh, the very man who sought to kill him.

But things continued to be complicated for Moses. In some verses we skipped between last week and this one, as a young man, Moses witnessed the harsh labor the Egyptians had enslaved the Hebrews to work. One day, he watched an Egyptian strike a Hebrew laborer. Something more than anger-- rage, I guess-- welled up inside Moses, and he looked to make sure no one was watching and then leapt up and killed the Egyptian, hiding his body in the sand. He thought that was the end of it-- until the next day, when he saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked them, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?” They asked him, “What? Do you plan to kill us like you did to that Egyptian?” Terror then seized Moses, for he realized Pharaoh would surely find out what he had done. And so, Moses ran for his life.

When we meet Moses today, he has spent some time in the land of Midian, where he met his wife, and got hired to tend his father-in-law's sheep.

There is something about tending animals-- particularly domesticated animals-- that puts order into chaos. I even say this as parent to a puppy. In just 3 weeks, Mister Kofi has gnawed on the wooden legs of our chairs; his baby teeth has torn holes into my shorts; and a couple weeks ago, I was snuggling him on my bed while I was perched there teaching our Zoom Bible Study, when suddenly he wandered to the other side of the bed and peed on it, which led to a very chaotic, early ending of Bible Study. Still, even with all the nipping and potty training, he grounds me in a practice of the ordinary, during extraordinary times. Now, instead of doom-scrolling, I am taking more walks-- and sometimes seeing church members when I do so. His needs are simple-- firm boundaries, lots of exercise, food, play, and plenty of naps, sometimes with his head resting on my leg... if my family can manage that, we have a calm, happy dog-- and I feel calmer, too.

I suspect that tending sheep was exactly what Moses needed to do at that point in his life, that the sheep even blessed him in ways that led him to see God. Our passage today tells us that Moses had led his flock of sheep "beyond the wilderness." Now, the wilderness plays a prominent role throughout Exodus. This same wilderness will be where the Hebrews will wander for 40 years once they escape Pharaoh's slavery in Egypt. But I also sense here that we are exploring the wilderness of Moses' soul, and now we see he has maybe moved beyond it. Here, we no longer see a violent rage. The sheep have taught him a more quiet thoughtfulness. He has learned how to protect against wolves and mountain lions. With God's help, he will be able to confront an even more dangerous enemy in Pharaoh.

But Moses will need some more soul mending first. Seeing how killing the Egyptian had not brought any of the changes he knew his people needed, doubt now fills him. Even when God bothers to talk to him, Moses hides his face in fear. He asks, when God tells him, "I have chosen YOU to bring my people out of the land of Egypt" "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? No one will believe me, and besides, how can I even tell them who has sent me?" Even beyond God revealing God's name to Moses-- I AM-- Moses continues to suggest ways that he is not good enough for this holy task. "What if they don't believe me, that you sent me?" and "I am slow of speech-- I can never come up with the right words; how will I find the thing to say that will make people listen?" And finally, "Oh my Lord. Please send someone else." Well, God assures Moses, plus throws in a staff that can turn into a serpent as a trick that will make the people believe, and commissions Moses' brother Aaron to be the one with the pretty words people will listen to. I am sure Moses still carried his doubts that he was the right person, that he was good enough for this impossible task, and yet, he responded "Here I am Lord," and began doing as God had called him.

I am sure Moses wondered if the wilderness of his soul was too fearful for any holy purpose to come of it. But God's encouragement can mend souls, and can find pathways where we never believed any could exist.

It's a good thing Moses took off his shoes when God appeared to him. He needed to soak up all that holiness from the ground that his imperfect body could hold. Those feet would carry him

back through the wilderness, to Egypt. They would carry him across the Red Sea. They would carry him again through the wilderness and up that mountain where he would again meet God to get the next set of instructions, not only for himself but for a whole people.

Yesterday as I was walking across a strip mall in Fort Lee after eating sushi outside with my family, I walked past a nail salon on my way to get a little treat from Cafe Bene. The lights were on at the nail salon, and there were 4 women inside, waiting for clients who wouldn't come. As we were walking back to our car, this time the women were standing on the sidewalk outside the nail salon. As I trudged back, I noticed one nail technician looking down. I followed her gaze-- right to my Birkinstocked feet. It's been over 6 months since I have had a pedicure, except for one spa day which Kai organized in our basement, and my feet show it. It hasn't really mattered either, because you mostly only see the upper half of me on your computer screens, and I'm not exactly going out on the town. "Yeah, I know I could use a pedicure," I told the technician. She enthusiastically nodded her agreement.

I know we all look to the days when we can be carefree getting a pedicure, or worship together inside the church, or head off to school worrying only about ordinary things like whether the homework was complete, or see the people and businesses in our community survive this financial catastrophe-- all these things as our land of milk and honey. Our wilderness has real fires, the kind that burn and consume, causing destruction in California. Our wilderness has communities ripped apart by violence and heartbreaking divisions, as we have seen in Kenosha and too many cities where unarmed black men and women have been killed by those assigned to protect. Our wilderness has a plague of its own in this pandemic, and we wonder, "Where is our Moses?"

As for Moses, he never does get to leave the wilderness once and for all, and chances are, neither will we. But if you take off your shoes right now, you might feel a tickle or even an itch on your feet. The truth is, anywhere that God can frame us, that is holy ground. So whether we are surrounded by a parking lot, or the four walls of our home office, whether we are surrounded by the mess of our own despair, or the promise of a hopeful tomorrow, the truth is, God can be in those places too and can call us to take part in God's pathways to liberation. We don't have to wait for a tomorrow we cannot yet see. God is doing this work on us right now, and if we open ourselves to it, we might find that our souls can also be mended and made fit to take it to the next level, making our feet co-conspirators in God's hopes and dreams for our world. May it be so. Amen.