

Sermon – Who Will Lead Them?

Exodus 33:12-23

Children's Sabbath – October 19, 2014

In the book *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, author Eyal Press explores the heroic acts of everyday people who act upon their convictions in radical ways. He looks at the lives of those who take risks in the name of conscience – even when such choices result in a loss of employment, a loss of freedom, or even a loss of life. *What makes these people tick?* The Nazi soldiers who refused to participate in a village massacre and laid down their arms? The financial broker who lost her job for refusing to keep her clients' assets in an offshore bank and who subsequently uncovered and exposed a billion dollar Ponzi scheme? From where does their courage come? On what grounds do they find the confidence to speak up for what they believe is right? Where do they find the strength to prioritize the needs of others, even when it comes at a great personal cost?

In our text for today, we walk into the middle of a risky conversation between Moses and God. We see how seriously Moses takes his role to shepherd God's people, as Moses advocates before God on behalf of the Israelites.

God has just instructed Moses to continue to lead the people to the land promised to Abraham – but has just informed Moses that God would not be going with them. The people had just constructed that Golden Calf, you see, while Moses was up on the mountaintop talking with God. And God is hurt by their betrayal, and afraid of what He might do to them in his anger.

Moses finds himself in the role of mediator – caught between a sinful people and an angry God. *He is unwilling to*

accept God's absence as an option, and so he stands between the Israelites, even in their sin, and God. He advocates on their behalf, insisting that God's presence would not leave them, and inviting the Living God to show up in a very tangible way on their behalf.

Moses' rhetoric is impeccable and convincing. He lays the groundwork for his argument by appealing to God's affection first just for himself - asking that if God is pleased with him, God teach and direct him. But at the end of his statement he reminds God: "This nation is your people." God promises to go with Moses.

A second time Moses appeals to God: Go with *us*. He asks: How will anyone know that you are pleased with me if you abandon *us* – the people you have asked me to lead? And God promises to go with Moses.

But as if to be sure, Moses asks to see God's glory, that God's presence might be immanent. And God passes by shielding Moses from God's face, but allowing him to glimpse his back as he moves by.

Moses stands between the people and God, refusing to give up on the people he has been leading through the wilderness – and refusing to give up on God. He has the audacity to hold God accountable to being there for those he loves and has worked so hard to free. He has the nerve to petition for God's mercy at a time when it is certainly *unearned*. He invites God to grace.

Today, there are people wandering through the wilderness too. They wander through the desert in search of safety, asylum, in search of a land flowing with milk and honey.

More and more of these people are children. Unaccompanied minors are traveling in droves to our country from nations in the northern triangle of Central America –

Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala – as well as from Mexico. In the last five years the numbers have skyrocketed – from the thousands to the tens of thousands. Last year, more than 40,000 children were estimated to have come to the United States seeking asylum. Most are between the ages of 12 and 17, and they arrive alone – without the care of a parent or legal guardian. Some arrive with the names and numbers of family members or friends who have already migrated to the US. Some arrive with nothing but the clothes on their back, vulnerable to the systems here to greet them.

Who is willing to speak on their behalf?

In a study conducted by the United Nations' High Commissioner on Refugees, it was reported that unaccompanied minors flee to the US to escape violence – mostly that of gangs, drug cartels, and the state. Some experience violence in their homes or have been victims of sexual violence in their communities. Some come to escape poverty or to be reunified with family members who have already migrated to this country. Some come in the pursuit of greater opportunity – pulled here by the allure of jobs and education in this land of prosperity.

And I ask: Who is there to care for these children? Who will stand with and for and with these children when they arrive on strange soil? Who will speak on their behalf, so that they can access the resources and rights provided for them by the law? Who will feed and clothe and shelter them? Who will remind them of their inherent worth when they struggle to cross a border set high to keep them out? Who will mediate the needs of the children – who are treated not as refugees but as prisoners when they set foot on US soil?

Research shows that most of the children who arrive at the border would qualify for protected status as a refugee in this country. The UNHCR reports that children disclosed that

their everyday challenges included “evading extortion; witnessing murders; and navigating threats to themselves and their families, friends and neighbors...The girls shared their fears of sexual violence.”

15 year old Maritza shares: *“I am here because the gang threatened me. One of them “liked” me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm...My uncle told me it wasn’t safe for me to stay there. They told him that on April 3, and I left on April 7. They said if I was still there on April 8, they would grab me, and I didn’t know what would happen...”*¹

Daniel, a 16 year old from Guatemala writes: *“Gangs in a nearby neighborhood wanted to kill me and some other people. They wanted me to give them money, but what money was I supposed to give them? I didn’t have any. They asked me a bunch of questions, like who was my father, and who was my family. I told them my father was dead. They told me to say goodbye because I was going to join my father. They asked me if I knew who they were, if I could identify them. I said no, because I knew if I said yes they would kill me. They held my cousin and me for three hours, tied up. My cousin was able to untie the rope and he helped me untie mine. We heard gun shots and we ran. They kept looking for us, but we escaped.”*²

The youth who come to America have lived complicated and often painful lives. Many have faced tragedies about which we will never know. They come with stories that need to be heard, and rights that need to be upheld.

¹http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/1_UAC_Children%20on%20the%20Run_Full%20Report.pdf

² *ibid*

What's more, they are more vulnerable because they are children –*and it is precisely because of their vulnerability that we need to date to take notice and risk standing in the gap.*

Our nation has struggled to identify a response to the influx of unaccompanied minors to the US that is both humane and just. While countries in the European Union have legislation that prioritizes the needs of the child, current US policy treats the children *first* as illegal immigrants. Procedures are in place to detain and try these youth – some have been housed in criminal detention centers. Some have been shackled. Legislative efforts reflect the polarized agendas of the parties in power: some advocating for an increased tightening of borders and others working toward an increased humanitarian response. Legislation passed this summer seeks to better fund the Department of Homeland Security so that they children more speedily processed and deported, while humanitarian groups call for policies that both ensure a more compassionate treatment of minors crossing our borders and an adequate hearing of their requests for asylum.

We must realize that WE have a problem as a nation when our primary response to the crises of the world's youth fails to honor their full humanity, and is anything shy of compassionate.

We have a problem as a nation when we view the presence of unaccompanied minors in our country as a crisis about border security rather than naming that the *heart* of the crisis is the violence, poverty and crime driving kids to seek asylum in our nation in the first place.

We grow shallow as a country when we fail to offer our best to the most vulnerable in our midst, and fail to treat other people's children as we would treat our very own.

There are children wandering in the wilderness. Some cross deserts in Mexico to approach the US border. Some

wander in urban deserts already within our borders, daily fighting poverty and violence here in our own nation. Some wander interior deserts of isolation and brokenness bred from abuse and neglect – even within homes that are rich in material positions.

As a people of faith, we must remember that the God we worship and serve – the God of the Israelites, even in their sin – is the God of all children too. Who will cry out and hold our government to a high standard of humanitarianism? Who is willing to risk some of your security so that others might be safe too? Who is willing to speak up on behalf of the children?

As we celebrate the National Children's Sabbath today, we have an opportunity to come before God and lift up those who are in need today – of leadership, of resources, of safety, of hope. We are called to discern how we might speak up on behalf of others – whether we think they deserve it or not – because of a sheer conviction that all of God's children, especially God's *children* are worthy of love.

Let us follow Christ's example and welcome the Children in Christ's name – trusting that we, too, are Children of God. Amen.