

>>> *Moses*

In the name of Jesus, dear friends who together share in his heavenly calling: To begin, I want you to think about the Old Testament saint and prophet Moses. That's right: Moses. Dredge up what you can remember about him and turn it around in your head for a moment. Allow me to help: Moses, let's see ... maybe you can remember some of the major events in his life: how when he was an infant his mother put him in a basket in the Nile River to save him from the Pharaoh's decree that the Israelite boys should die; how later the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush and sent him to deliver his people from slavery; how he confronted the Pharaoh with the demand of God, "Let my people go"; how he parted the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to escape from the chariots of the pursuing Egyptians; how he received God's Word written on stone tablets at Mount Sinai; how he led Israel forty long years in their desert wanderings; and from today's first lesson, how he died on Mount Nebo after have been allowed by the Lord to see but not to enter the Promised Land.

Moses ... I'm guessing that you don't think about him every day. Is that about right? More than that, if I asked you to rate his overall significance in the biblical storyline, how he stacks up against some of the other major characters, you'd say "important" or "very important"; but not "off the charts important". No, most of us would rate him more or less shoulder to shoulder with some of the other great Old Testament people of God; folks like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and David, to name but a few – all of whom had big parts to play in the unfolding revelation of God's plan of salvation. It's just the way Christians living in our day tend to think.

Ah, but that's not how faithful people living at the time of Christ saw things. For them Moses was the undisputed super star. Everything turned on him. For them it was, "Yes, Abraham is our father, and we are the descendants of Jacob (or Israel, as he was renamed); but Moses is the guy upon whom everything stands or falls. He was our deliverer, our leader, the man through whom God gave us his holy Word: the first five books of the Bible – which are by far the most important from our perspective. That's what defines who we are. That's what shapes us as a nation. It's the lens through which understand all the other sacred writings and by which we see the world and our place in it. Faithful people lived day by day according to the dictates of Moses. Got a question? Whatever it is, you take it to the ultimate authority. You ask, "What did Moses say?" It's absolutely impossible for me to overstate how important Moses was to Jewish people living in the first century.

And here's the thing: when that sort of idea – that someone is so very important to your faith and life – is ingrained into your very being, it's awfully hard to make a switch. But that is precisely what the writer of today's Epistle, the letter to the Hebrews, is attempting to do. He's writing to first century Jews and telling them to shift their focus away from Moses and onto the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, back then there were a lot of Jewish people who were coming to faith in Jesus. They believed Jesus to be the long promised Messiah and Savior from sin. But they couldn't break out of the Moses mindset. They were like spaceships being called to the light of a distant star, but that couldn't escape the gravitational pull of their home planet. They insisted on defining themselves and ordering their lives by Moses and what he said rather than by Christ and what he said.

Thus we see the writer of Hebrews telling them, "Look at Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. There's a lot there. First, he calls Jesus *the apostle*, that is "the sent one". He's doing a comparison. Moses was also sent: sent from the burning bush to deliver

God's people from slavery. Jesus was sent by God the Father from heaven to deliver his people from sin, death, and hell. He is the greater Sent One. Then he calls Jesus the high priest of our confession. Moses was never the high priest. His brother Aaron did that job. And in that capacity he offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. But Jesus is *The High Priest*, who offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. And he's called the High Priest of our *confession*, that is, the content and truths of our holy faith: that in Christ Jesus, in his holy life, his innocent suffering and death, and his resurrection, God has reconciled us to himself and granted us eternal life.

The passage continues saying that Jesus was faithful to the Father who appointed him to this task, as Moses was also faithful; but Jesus is counted as worthy of much more glory – as the builder of a house is worthy of more honor than the house he builds. That is to say, when you see a home or building that shows incredible craftsmanship, you don't honor the house, you honor the guy who designed and built it. Moses, he was part of the house. He was a servant in it. But Jesus, he's the designer, the builder, and the owner of it. Moses in his day faithfully told of much greater things to come. Jesus is what he was talking about. Therefore from here on, Jesus needs to be our undivided focus.

And really, this is a big part of what's going on in today's Gospel, which describes the Transfiguration of Jesus. The startled disciples look up to see three figures standing before them: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – who was another heavy hitter in God's Old Testament revelation. They all three appear in glory; but the glory of Moses and Elijah is reflected. The glory of Jesus, much brighter, shines out from within him. Astounded and not knowing what to say, Peter proposes building three shelters or shrines on the mountain top for them, as if all three of them were equal. But then the frightful cloud overshadows them, and they hear the voice of the Father, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" And when the cloud clears, Moses and Elijah have vanished. They've faded away. Jesus stands alone, indicating that he alone is to be the center of our attention. We are to listen to him and only to him.

Now, to us, the faithful living so many centuries later, this is pretty much a no-brainer. For us it's been the *Christian* Church all our lives, which means the focus has always been on Jesus. We never had this gravitational pull toward Moses that we needed to escape, so it might seem – on the surface at least – that these texts don't have a lot to say to us. But Jesus always has something to say. And he speaks to us through his Word. And with that in mind, there are several lessons here even for us.

First, it must be said that from time to time throughout the church's history there have arisen pastors and teachers who want to direct the faithful back to Moses and to the Old Testament covenants that long since have been fulfilled in and by Christ. They want to reinstate the laws that applied to the nation of Israel like the strict Sabbath ordinances, the ancient festivals like Passover and the Feast of Booths, and any number of other things that were pictures and types designed to point us to Jesus. Sometimes they try to re-impose the dietary laws that applied to the Jews. The basic idea is that we'll be better Christians by going back to Moses and learning from him how to be good and faithful Jews. This makes no sense. It's like saying the only way to enjoy being at some destination you've wanted to visit is by retracing the steps to get there over and over again. No. Once you get to where you're going, stay there and enjoy it. We have Christ. Why go back to Moses who only pointed the way to him?

Second, we learn from today's readings that Christ is the lens through which we are to see and understand all the sacred Scripture. Moses, the prophets, the chroniclers, the psalmists ... in one way or another, they were all writing about Jesus. They were telling us about him: sometimes in direct prophecies, other times with the stories of their lives that

illustrated things Jesus would say and do, and still other times with ceremonies and practices that pointed ahead to the mission and ministry of Christ – the sacrifices are a good example of this. They all ultimately point to Christ. So if we are reading any passage of the Bible, if we aren't seeing how it relates to Jesus and his work to save us from sin, we're missing the biggest part of what it's all about.

Third, we learn that Jesus is without equal and should never be treated as if he were just one among many. It's not Moses *and* Jesus, or Moses *and* Elijah *and* Jesus. It's only Jesus. Perhaps you heard that our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod was back in the news this past week – and not in a favorable light. What happened was this: in the aftermath of the horrific school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, they staged an interfaith community prayer vigil and memorial service. And one of our pastors had a part in it. The problem is this: by helping to lead a worship service in which priests and rabbis from other religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Baha'i also participated, it communicated the message (so popular in our culture) that Jesus is just one of many legitimate options when it comes to sources of spiritual truth. That's not good. And all of our pastors have agreed not to take part in these kinds of mixed faith religious services. It's one of the things we swear to when we become pastors. So, doing his job, the president of our synod wrote to the pastor, and told him he'd made a mistake and should apologize for his error – which he did. That should have been the end of it; but detractors of our current synod president picked up the story and began shouting it to the press, who in turn have tried to blow it up into a big scandal: how those hateful LCMS people refuse even to pray for grieving families in Newtown. It's ridiculous, really; but it's part of the price of bearing witness to the truth. If you stand up and say, "Jesus only", you will be despised and persecuted. And look, I know that the pastor in question had good intentions when he helped lead this mixed faith service. So did Peter when he proposed building three shrines for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. The trouble with both is that they put forth Jesus as one among many. And that's always wrong no matter how good your intentions are. Besides, the best way to minister to grieving families like those in Newtown is to give them only Jesus.

And that brings me to our fourth and final lesson: that, as the voice from the cloud said, we listen to him. We're about to enter the penitential season of Lent. Jesus didn't stay on the mount of Transfiguration shining in heavenly splendor. No, he went down the mountain and began his steady march toward Jerusalem and the cross where in all humility he gave his life for us. Speaking to us, he bids us, "Take up your cross, and follow me". May we listen to his voice, now and always, following him who is very much greater than Moses, and who by his Word gives us eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!