

What's your most reliable source of strength? **What source of life are you drawing from?** It's a good question for Christians because so much of Christian faith has to do with the source of life that we're drawing from. Our faith has always been more about our source of life than any of our accomplishments or fame.

For people of faith, **Moses is the premier figure who was both drawn from a source of death, and transformed into someone who (eventually) trusts God for his source of life.** It's a big theme in Moses' life. He's rescued from death, delivered from death, freed from perpetrating death, and he's transformed into Israel's premier rescuer from slavery, deliverer from bondage, and teacher of life.

And there's nothing special about Moses. God doesn't choose him because of his own wisdom, power, or cleverness. In fact the early part of his story emphasizes how incompetent and stubborn he is. It's even been suggested the next time Hollywood makes a movie about Moses (because they seem to keep making new Exodus movies every 10 or 15 years) instead of looking for someone like Charlton Heston or Christian Bale, they should maybe look for someone like Woody Allen.<sup>1</sup> Because Moses is a Grade A mess. He's impulsive and insecure. He makes rash decisions and when God shows up in the burning bush to personally

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.spu.edu/lectio/unlikely-heroes/>

recruit him for a mission, Moses spends most of the conversation telling God to find someone else.

It's only through time in the wilderness, after killing that Egyptian slave master; **it's only then, after Moses runs into the desert, that he begins learning to draw from a new source of strength.** It's only in the wilderness he begins learning to draw from the deep well of trust in God. It's only when he's on the margins of the world. Literally. In the desert.

**That's an interesting pattern we find in Scripture.** You can certainly find a few characters in Scripture who work in centers of power. As we heard last week, Joseph famously rose to 2nd in command of all Egypt a few hundred years before Moses. But royal power or influence is only one of the ways that God seems to work in the world. If Scripture is any indication, then royal power or influence isn't even the most reliable way that God seems to work in the world.

**Whenever God is about to do a "new thing" in the world; whenever God is about to reveal divine justice, mercy, and love through acts of rescue or renewal, more often than not God works with people on the margins.** God works with hurting or lonely people like the barren *Hannah*, mother of the great prophet Samuel. God works with surprisingly unreliable people like *Saul*, a good-

looking but undependable peasant from Israel's smallest tribe who becomes their first king (it doesn't go very well). God works with people like *David*, the youngest, smallest, and most forgettable of 8 brothers who spent most of his time in the desert tending sheep. More often than not, God takes people from the margins and gives them a mission to bless the world (even if it doesn't go well).

You see, **there's something unique about the strength, or source of life that marginal people learn to draw from.** There's something unique about time in wilderness, isolation, dishonor, disrepute or obscurity; there's something unique about those times that help us learn to draw from the deep well of faith & trust in God. Think about this, when Moses grows up (physically & spiritually) and leads the people of Israel themselves *into the desert* after their escape from Egypt, they spend an entire generation (40 yrs.) learning to follow the God who rescued them; learning to draw strength & life from the God of their faith. On multiple occasions **God commands Moses to bring water from a rock in the desert. It's a loaded image because it reinforces what they're doing out there to begin with.** They weren't just passing time. They were learning how to draw on the waters of faith & trust in God as a source of life even in the midst of the harshest circumstances. **God wants their trust. He wants them to draw strength from their faith.**

Because God wants to use them to share blessing & life with the world.

Life on the margins can help us draw strength from our trust in God. And that's good news. Because most of us spend most of our lives on the margins. I know we live in a nation where **everyone is looking for 15 minutes of fame. But most of us still live in relative obscurity.** Even those of us who happen to be high achievers or have lots of followers on social media.

We live in a world that encourages us to draw from a source of life that's infinitely wide but just a few inches deep. Thanks to the internet and our "smart" devices we have instant access to the accumulated wisdom & knowledge of generations. It's a gift. But it also means we don't need to think very deeply about the source of life that we're drawing from. We don't need to think very much about being formed, even challenged, to draw from the life-giving depths of a faith that's born in the wilderness & on the margins. And yet, so much of Christian faith is about the source of life that we're drawing from rather than any of our accomplishments. What's your most reliable source of strength?

It's no wonder the story of Moses **begins with a couple of marginal characters.** These two midwives, Shiphrah & Puah, who defy the most powerful person in their world because we hear twice they "feared God." That's *Bible talk*

for: they depended on God, they relied upon God, they trusted God -- as their deepest source of strength, even more than a command from their king. In their world, maybe Pharaoh is someone the “fake news” thinks is important, but that Pharaoh can be outmatched by a few clever women<sup>2</sup> — that’s a big deal in a world where they didn’t exactly have female superheroes.

So much of our Christian life, the journey we begin at baptism, is learning to draw from the deep well of trust in God. It’s about learning the Fear of the Lord. **Baptism is a sacrament where we symbolically draw a person -- even a very small person, like Moses -- from the waters of death and prayerfully commit them to the God who gives life even in the harshest circumstances.** And it’s a community journey.

So we hear from Paul today in a letter to the Romans, that these early Christians who are just beginning to learn how to follow Jesus and to draw strength from the well of faith; we hear Paul encourage them to **present themselves as a living sacrifice**. You see, he’s encouraging them to perform in their church the same thing Moses’ mother performed in the Exodus. She places her child (*her very self, her very life, her very future*) as a living sacrifice in the waters of death and

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<sup>2</sup> Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone*, 10.

she entrusts her child (*her very self, her very life, her very future*) into the hands of God. It's a loaded image. It's the same image we find in Genesis when Noah builds an ark to preserve his family when the world is consumed by waters of death. It's the same image early Christians used for the Church. For early Christians, the Church itself was God's ark, God's basket, God's boat to preserve God's people in the midst of even the harshest circumstances. **The Church is what carries us to new life with God and our neighbor.** For some of the earliest Church Fathers, the wood of the cross even symbolized the wood of the ark that preserved humanity.<sup>3</sup>

*That's* the image Paul uses when he encourages us to present ourselves as a living sacrifice. He encourages us to offer *ourselves, our very life, our very future*, entrusting ourselves to God. He even goes so far as saying we've been buried with Christ in baptism *so that* we can be raised with Jesus to new life (Ro. 6).

**Paul is encouraging us to be transformed by all those places, and experiences, and relationships that look & feel so marginal in our lives.** He says don't be discouraged if we don't get the notoriety we hoped for, because we each have different gifts -- and we're all members of each other. Every so-called

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XV.26.html>

high achiever belongs to every person on the so-called margins of our community (and vice versa). We're not separated. We're deeply connected because we're the Body in Christ, and we all draw from the same waters of life in baptism.

If that all seems a bit too optimistic; if it sounds like a fantasy or a wish dream, then in closing, let's remember this. When Paul "urges" and "encourages" us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, he's using a term that reminds us about God's work — not our work. We don't ever muster up the strength to become a sacrifice on our own. When Paul urges & encourages us, he uses the word *paraclete*. He *paracletes* us to offer ourselves as a sacrifice. And, of course, that's the name Jesus himself gives the Holy Spirit. At the Last Supper Jesus promises he's going to leave a *paraclete* -- a comforter, an encourager. Jesus promises to leave himself in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Even today's Collect picks up that image by reminding us that we're gathered as the Church only by the encouraging work of the Holy Spirit. So whatever power we have as the Church isn't about our achievements. It's about God already working in us and through. We allow God to form us into a living sacrifice for the world.

So today as we gather at the baptismal font to welcome another person into this life of faith, let's remember as we hear in the Psalm, that our God is not against

us. The God who invites us to become a living sacrifice is also a God who's relentlessly for us; eternally our encourager & our *paraclete*. *If the Lord had not been on our side*, then would our enemies (then would the waters of death) have overwhelmed us. *But blessed be the Lord! He has not given us to be a victim for our enemies. Our help (our very self, our very life, ver our future) is in the name of the Lord.* And who is the Lord? Who is our God and encourager? No less than, *the maker of heaven and earth. Amen.*