

EXODUS pt 5 4:1-17 10-13-13
The Arming of Moses

(Exodus 4) Recently I heard a speaker introduce his wife and tell the audience, “Tonight, my lovely wife and I celebrate twenty-two years of married bliss. Of course, we’ve been married thirty years but hey, 22 out 30 ain’t too bad.” And, in a way, he’s right. If there is anything that marks the lives of every person it is inconsistency. Atheists are inconsistent. Christians are inconsistent. Children are inconsistent and so are adults. This explains I guess why the Steelers are 0-4 and the Pirates made it to the playoffs. Inconsistency is a mark of our humanity. And except for Jesus that is the way it was with all the biblical heroes. They all had their high points and their low points as we will see in our look today at Moses in all of his mortal inconsistency. In the Family Circus comic strip last week the little boy got 5 out of 10 on his spelling test and told his mother that was okay because batting 500 was really good. I don’t know. It depends what you are doing I suppose. In chapter 4 of Exodus Moses bats 500 in his responses to God. He does well and he does bad. Today you get to see both sides of the man. Point one of my sermon is, “Moses meets the challenge!” Yea, Moses. Say it with me, “Yea Moses.” Point two of my sermon is “Moses turns chicken!” And don’t boo - don’t boo, you’ve done this too.

Let’s look then at the first part of the story. Moses has encountered God out in the desert of Midian where God appeared to him in a burning bush that was not consumed and God has told Moses to go back to Egypt and deliver the Hebrews from their slavery by confronting the great and powerful Pharaoh with the word of the Lord. But before he can represent the concerns of Israel before Pharaoh Moses must first win over his own nation which he isn’t sure he can do. In fact, there are a lot of things Moses is struggling with about his new role as national savior. So, **1** *Then Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'"* I mean, let’s suppose you go to your office tomorrow, or to your family, or even to your church and say, “God’s been talking to me.” What kind of reaction would you expect? Moses has the same concern. Moses does not come from the God said it, I believe it, that settles it school. God has already told him that the Hebrews would believe him. 3:**18a** *They will pay heed to what you say.* But Moses still isn’t sure. Friends, Christians are not the gullible, unthinking, dummies some people make us out to be. More often we are hard-headed, doubt-filled dummies. You read the Bible and you’ll find it’s the doubter’s hall of fame. When God made outlandish promises to Abraham and Sarah what did they do? They laughed! When God told

Jeremiah to go preach what did he say? I'm too young. When the angel told Mary about the virgin birth what did she say? "How can this be?" John the Baptist wasn't sure for a while if Jesus was the Messiah. Peter, he didn't believe that Jesus really had risen from the dead. All these folks went on to display great and glorious faith but they didn't start that way. They weren't natural suckers; they were skeptics. Like Moses, who hears God say that the Hebrews will believe him and five verses later says, "What if they won't believe me." And God is so patient! So patient! He doesn't zap us for our failings of faith, instead He works on us to strengthen our faith. Let's see how He did that for Moses.

2-5 *The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." 3 Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. 4 But the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail"--so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand-- 5 "that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.* Wow, what a story! The shepherd staff becomes a snake. The snake, especially the cobra, was the symbol of Egyptian power. Pharaoh had a serpent's head carved on the end of his staff. I know that's true because I saw Yule Brynner holding it in the Ten Commandments. For Moses to control the snake symbolized his dominance of Pharaoh thru the power of God. But for Moses to control the snake was no small thing. Moses didn't like snakes. He reacts to snakes like I do; he runs away. I hate snakes. They give me the creeps and I think that's pretty normal. In fact, if you are one of those people who are attracted to snakes I suggest you get some professional help. Getting near a snake is bad enough. Grabbing one is crazy. You aren't supposed to grab snakes, you are supposed to run over them with a truck but that's what God tells Moses to do. And it gets worse yet because God says to grab the snake how? By it's tail. That's not how the guys on Animal Planet do it. If you have to grab a snake you go right for the business end because grabbing the tail is pure folly. But that is what God told Moses to do. This is a watershed moment in the life of Moses. God has given a plain command that seems to Moses quite contrary to common sense and certainly contrary to his desires. This is a faith challenge. There are certain moments in Biblical history that bring all the major spiritual issues to a single point and this is one of them. Will Moses trust God? Will Moses obey God?

Better yet, will you? Put yourself where Moses is? Would you pick up the snake? What is the conflict here? It's between your fear and your faith isn't it? Or between what seems in your best

interest and what God says to do. We don't know how long it took Moses to do this but surely he thought long enough to understand how risky this was and how repugnant it was to grab this snake by the tail. Let me tell you where you face the same struggles. Moses thought, "If I obey God and grab the snake I'll get bit." You think, "If I embrace sexual purity I'll be deprived, I'll miss out! If I commit to tithing I won't have enough money! If I stop lying I'll get in trouble! I could lose my job! If I choose to love instead of to look out for #1, I'll be trampled on and misused! If I vow to marry only a godly man then I may stay single!" These are the debates raging in your soul aren't they? God hasn't asked you to grab hold of a snake but He has asked you to grasp love and humility and purity and to you those things appear to be harmful not helpful. That's the challenge to trust God, not your senses! And Moses meets the challenge! Yea Moses! Say it with me, "Yea Moses!" Did Moses trust God? Yes. How do you know? It doesn't say, "Moses trusted God." How do you know? You know because He obeyed, don't you. Obedience to God is the outward manifestation of trust in God. Trust and obey for there's no other way. To trust and obey is not to do two things... but one. You with me? Now, some people say, "Yeah I trust God, but I'm not gonna do what He said." Do you see the contradiction there? The failure to obey God is a failure to believe God, plain and simple.

Let's be honest - believing God is not always that easy. When he says to give and you'll get, to die and you'll live, to pick up the snake and you'll be glad you did - that's tough stuff. Only the grace of God can carry us through. That's why G.K. Chesterton so wisely said, "The Christian life has never been tried and found wanting. It has only been found difficult and left untried." Praise God, Moses had faith to grab the snake. He obeyed God and what did He get as a result? He got a super fantabulous miracle stick! He got the rod of God as it came to be called! Moses went on to do incredible things with his staff. The purpose for God equipping Moses with miracle power is told to us in verse 5 *that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.* There you see it, but let's read on. Exodus 4:6-9 *The Lord furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom." So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. ⁷ Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. ⁸ "If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign. ⁹ But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water*

from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.” The primary purpose for the miracles God works thru his servants is always the same. Whether with Jesus or Peter or Elijah or Moses they are done to validate the messenger of God’s word. The miracles of Moses were to make him believable. That is God’s major purpose in miracles. And having said that I need to add two other thoughts. #1 is that just because God validates the message of some via miracles does not mean He always does this. You cannot assume that the absence of miracles means an absence of God’s word. Not at all. You listen to some teachers and you can get the impression that doing miracles has always been the norm for God’s prophets and it is just not so. Even in Scripture the working of miracles was not the norm. There were three periods of the miraculous in the Bible. The time of Moses, the time of Elijah and Elisha and the era of Jesus and the apostles. And that is all. We don’t read about miracles occurring through Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob or David, or the many prophets who penned God’s word, or the ministry of John the Baptist. John was called the greatest man born of woman and yet it says he did no miracle. I’ve heard faith-healer types argue that we ought to see many miracles today because God never changes, He is the same yesterday and today and forever. And it’s true, God never changes, but His ways of working with men do. Sometimes He uses the miracle and sometimes He doesn’t. Think about it - miracles are important when they happen for what reason? Because they happen so seldom! By definition miracles can’t happen every day with everybody and they don’t - so don’t expect one to bail you out. Don’t be closed to it either. God does surprise. My second additional thought to this point is that miracles, or seeming miracles do not in themselves prove a man to be a prophet. You still have to weigh the teacher’s words on the scales of holy Scripture. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 *If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.* The New Testament speaks of false prophets doing false wonders and warns us against them. Martin Luther wrote this: *if the devil were to begin to perform signs thru some false prophet and perhaps cure a sick person, you would no doubt see the mob press to espouse the cause in such a way that no preaching or warning would be of any avail...For in those who have no love for the truth, the devil will be powerful and strong...If then those teachings contradict the chief doctrine of*

Christ, we should accord them neither attention nor acceptance though it were to snow miracles daily. (Agony of Deceit p.29). Later we will, in fact, see that the magicians of Egypt did some pretty amazing things. The first test of a prophet however is the consistency of his message with the revealed word of God.

Alright, we have seen Moses' victory of faith and the reward that came with it, now we move to the bad news portion of the sermon. Part two is Moses turns chicken. **10** *Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.* Another excuse! **11,12** *The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 "Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."* The complaint of Moses implies that God really hadn't thought through everything yet. Isn't that a clear implication? Isn't that something you have done before? We forget who we are dealing with. We tell God He has overrated our capacities even though He made us. I tell you, that simple understanding that you are fashioned by the Lord will get you over so many hurdles. That's why the first question in the children's catechism is, "Who made you?" When a child understands that I have been made by God he/she is emotionally way beyond the evolutionist. God says in verse 11, "You don't need to tell me what you are like Moses. I not only know what you are like, I made you that way." This is an exciting thought to me, that God is willing to take the blame for how I am wired. That's no excuse for my sin but it is for my long neck and my odd temperament. God also says, "I make men dumb and deaf and blind." Really! I thought the devil did those things. Isn't that what the preacher on TV told you? Yeah, you heard it from Rev. Earnest but not from God. God takes full credit for your natural strengths and your natural weaknesses. But He also claims the right to go beyond those or to change those. He tells Moses, "I will control your mouth." Again, the old rule: what God calls you to do He will equip you to do. Now usually this means that God will call you into ministry that fits your abilities but hey, if God appears to you in a burning bush all the normal rules are annulled. You do what the bush tells you to do whether it fits your performax results or not. Normally I tell men that if God is calling them to be a teacher they will exhibit certain skills in study and language but with a call as clear as this one the only challenge is to trust. Trust God to make you able! God can even speak through you! After all, He delivered a message to Balaam by means of his donkey didn't he? Think about that. That donkey had no native speaking gifts and yet God used him. And if God can speak through Balaam's

donkey he can certainly work through you. When God says to go and do, don't start mouthing the negatives. God will be with you! Your inabilities don't count. They just supply an opportunity to lay hold of the promise that I can do all things thru Him who strengthens me. Moses missed it. Moses blew it. Moses turned chicken!

13 *But he said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will."* Can you believe it? Moses refuses God. The audacity in that! At least, I guess, we can give him credit for being polite about it. He did use the magic word didn't he? Moses said, 'Please.' In the NIV translation he says, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it." I've heard that line before, but Moses said it first. Let someone else do it. This is one verse many of you have learned by heart and use frequently. I pulled out this piece from my file - it says it so well. A bit from a church newsletter says: *The church was saddened to learn of the death this week of one of our church's most valuable members. Someone Else. Someone's passing creates a vacancy that will be difficult to fill. Else has been with us for many years. Someone did far more than a normal person's share of the work. Whenever there was a job to do, a class to teach, a committee to be chaired, or a meeting to attend, one name was on everyone's list. "Let Someone Else do it." It was common knowledge that someone else was among the largest givers in the church; whenever there was a financial need everyone just assumed that someone else would make up the difference. Someone Else was a wonderful person, sometimes appearing superhuman, but truth is that we all expected too much of someone else. Now Someone Else is gone. We wonder what we are going to do. Who will do the things Someone Else did. Pray for our nominating committee.*

Why did Moses insist on someone else? I mean, this turns out to be a terrible mistake, why did he do it? He was afraid wasn't he? He could not get around his paralyzing fear of public speaking. Some of you have the same hang-up don't you? Some people have problems grabbing snakes, others have problems making speeches. Which is it with you? I read a poll which ranked public speaking as the #1 most feared experience in life. What would you prefer God to tell you to do? Pick up a cobra or speak before Pharaoh and the elders? Let's take a poll here. Who would prefer to work with snakes? Who would prefer the public speaking? Moses passed the snake test but he failed Speech 101.

Moses sent God looking for someone else but God wasn't willing, and He also wasn't happy with Moses. **14a** *Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses.* But you'll notice as you read that God still deals gently with Moses. He shows his stubborn servant amazing sympathy. **14-17**

Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 15 "You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. 16 "Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. 17 "You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs. God doesn't give his job away entirely but He does find Moses some help for his weakness in the person of Aaron. What Moses would not do alone he is willing to do with a partner. God was kind to Moses, but that doesn't change the fact that Moses did wrong, Moses compromised. God let him compromise but Moses would pay dearly for what he did. Because he would not trust God later in life Moses faced some terrific leadership headaches. You remember it was Aaron who led the people to build the golden calf. It was Aaron, who in Numbers 12 decided to challenge the authority of Moses. Aaron became a thorn in his side, but hey, Moses asked for it didn't he. Moses forfeited greater influence and authority because he would not go beyond a particular comfort zone. He was unwilling to step out and trust God and he got burned because of it.

If there is one thing I get out of both the success of Moses and his failure it is that faith involves taking risks. To follow the Lord we often have to do what seems dangerous and feels scary. Personally, I don't like to put myself in positions where I may fail. Ahh! We don't want to risk failure so we guarantee mediocrity by doing only what feels safe. We too often trade prosperity for security.® Few people start businesses because that involves risk. Few people start ministries because that involves risk. Faithless people value security. We want Uncle Sam to guarantee us a job and a house and food on our table. We want national health care and I guess the government can give us these things for a while but these come at the expense of national prosperity and personal maturity. Security is nice but not when it keeps us from God's best. You miss out on so many good things when you refuse to take risks. Ever tried to get a kid to eat something new? That can be so frustrating. You give the kid something you know he'll really like but he won't try it because it might taste "yuck." And when it comes to food kids don't trust their parents. They trust each other more, they'll eat it if Mikey likes it but not because Daddy does. God holds out many good things for those who trust Him and try it but you have to be ready to accept some risks. You have to be open to the idea that you may fail, or be rejected or lose money. But Christians can take

risks because we know that underneath us are the everlasting arms, and if we die we go straight to glory. I want to tell you a great story.

It was a freezing morning on December 25, 1809 in the wilderness community of Danville, Kentucky. A silent, tense mob was gathered in the snow outside the log cabin home of handsome frontier surgeon, Ephraim McDowell. The ominous group had framed a hangman's noose for the good doctor's neck. They were kept from charging the doc's cabin only by the pleas of their sheriff. From the log house came the sound of a woman's voice singing, Amazing Grace. Inside a wondrous event transpired. For the first time ever a surgeon was successfully opening the stomach cavity of a living human patient. He was meticulously excising a festering ovarian tumor. This was the birth of abdominal surgery, a procedure which has since saved millions of lives. The very idea of cutting into a human abdomen, even to save a life, was abhorrent to those who heard of the operation. Accordingly, they decided that if the patient died, the surgeon must die too, by hanging.

There was no anesthesia. The 46 year old patient, Jane Crawford, clenched her fists, recited psalms, and sang hymns. Antiseptic was yet to be discovered. McDowell and his assistants operated in ordinary clothing. But the tall red-faced man was no ordinary surgeon. Dr. McDowell was a man of strength and brilliance, the best surgeon on the frontier. The patient thought she was ten months pregnant, but McDowell diagnosed her swollen body as having a deadly ovarian tumor. Faced with certain death, or an operation never before performed, Jane bravely agreed the surgery.

McDowell, a devout Christian, set to operate on December 25 to gain the prayers of believers meeting that day for worship. Before beginning the operation the doctor prayed, "Almighty God, be with me. I humbly beseech Thee. Grant me Thy direction and aid. If it be Thy will, spare this poor, afflicted woman." Within 25 minutes McDowell removed 23 pounds of diseased growth, then tipped his courageous patient's body over like a cup in order to drain the excess blood and sewed up the nine inch incision. The patient fully recovered and lived to the age of 79. And Dr. McDowell, who had risked his neck to save a life, was spared a hanging. Instead he ended up with his face on a stamp – among other things.

That my friends, is the epitome of a hero. This man risked his own reputation and his own life to save the life of another. And he wasn't sure he could do it. It had never been done before! Most of the remarkable, courageous deeds of history were done by scared, uncertain people. And since I am so often scared and uncertain that means that I am in good company, and in a good place to just put my hope in the Lord and do what He calls me to do.

Here is where it all leads - you study, you pray, you search for the will of God and then you go after it with all you've got regardless of the risks involved. Maybe that means a new ministry for you. Maybe that means a new level of obedience to God's word in some areas that are hard or scary for you. Whatever it is, don't be stopped by fear. Move on, and move out in faith. God will make you able. God will be with you, so aggressively obey His word. Those who dilly dally around with Jesus, who compromise their faith never find any satisfaction. It's only when we lay it all on the line, trust God and obey that we experience abundant life. I close with this statement of fear-defying resolve. I hope your heart can say an amen as you hear it.

I'm part of a following of the unashamed. I have Holy spirit power; the die has been cast – I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made; I am a disciple of His. I will not let up, look back, slow down or be still. My past is redeemed; my present makes sense, my future is secure. I have finished and am done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, mundane talking, chincy giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-imminence, prosperity, position, promotion or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised or rewarded. My face is set, my gate is fast, my goal is sure. My road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few. My God is reliable; my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, delayed or deluded. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. When He comes for his own he will have no problem recognizing me, because my colors are clear. (Mike Peters)

Let's pray together for the grace to trust and the grace to risk.

“Father, You are sufficient for us. You have made us, You know us. We are your servants and glad to be so. Forgive us now for our foolish doubting. Forgive us when we take our eyes off your mighty arm and focus on our own weakness. Fill us now with a holy, carefree confidence that You will stand with and by your obedient servants. You will not let the devil rejoice over us. Give us then faith to grab snakes by the tail, to speak your word to kings, to do whatever it is you are telling us to do. Free us from the shackles of fear and send us forth in Your might to do great things in your name, for so we pray thru Jesus our Lord Amen”