

Commentary on Exodus 5-7

There's something about being known.

Just as we humans want to love and be loved in return, it can also be said that we experience love when we are known and understood.

When someone asks me a question and genuinely desires an answer that only I alone can give, a knowing happens within me. I feel loved because this person took the time to understand who I am and what I'm all about—and I, in turn, am led to further know and understand them in response.

Whether it's my husband, a friend, or an acquaintance on the front steps of my children's elementary school, when someone takes the time to really know me, I genuinely feel loved.

In a way, the same unfolds in this week's reading: first with Moses, then with Pharaoh, and, even, dare I say, with God.

Throughout Exodus 5–7, the reader grows to know and understand the character of Moses. Just as Moses is God's ambassador, we also see within him a real faith: a faith that doesn't know all the answers, but still shows up. A faith that believes in himself and in his God one minute, then wavers and doubts like it's his very *job* the next.

Moses doubts his ability to speak, once again calling himself a poor speaker (Exodus 6:30). Other translations cite this as “faltering lips” (NIV) or by the simple declaration, “I stutter” (*The Message*). Regardless of specifics, his speech impediment causes God to problem-solve on the spot and enlist the help of Moses' brother, Aaron, to accompany him before the Pharaoh.

Of course, his doubt doesn't end there.

Exodus 5 ends with the following declaration from Moses: “O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people” (5:22-23).

Moses doesn't hold back with a litany of accusatory “why?” questions. He doesn't try and sugarcoat his experience, but he speaks with an openness and an honesty that's rather refreshing, if you think about it.

The more he speaks, the more we get to know him – and the more we are reminded that God is always in the business of using ordinary, prone-to-doubt humans like ourselves. Moses, one theologian writes, “was seeking reassurance ... confirmation that he was, indeed, obeying. Moses was learning.” I don't doubt Moses was a lot like us.

As readers, we also get to know more about the villain of these chapters, Pharaoh himself.

Like a toddler who only utters a singular “no,” Pharaoh’s response is much the same: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go” (5:2). Just as God predicted, Pharaoh’s heart becomes hardened and he refuses to listen to Moses and Aaron (7:13). As a result, God’s people are forced to build bricks without the king’s straw; later, blood is everywhere, covering the Egyptian land.

But just as the reader gets to know the doubting figure of Moses, we get to know the Pharaoh who doesn’t fully understand. “He had obviously never heard of Yehoveh,” the aforementioned theologian continues. “Further, since gods were territorial, and the Hebrews lived in Egypt, Pharaoh was incredulous that there could have existed a god that had some undefined kind of influence within Egypt, and he didn’t know that god.”

Knowing a god’s name mattered to an ancient Egyptian mind, because when you knew a god’s name, you could communicate with a god—and if you could communicate with a god, you could get that god to do what you wanted. Although Pharaoh got his wires got crossed in the many noes he spewed, I also can’t help but wonder if Pharaoh merely wanted to know the God Moses and Aaron spoke of—so that he might love and be loved by this same God of Aaron and Moses.

In that way, perhaps Pharaoh is there to remind us to choose empathy. We choose to be empathetic even when we disagree, even when we are told “no,” even when we don’t understand. We can let a mindset of empathy guide our path.

Because there, at the front of the path and at the end of the path, above the path and below the path, and at every inch around the path, is the God who is with us—the God who is called I-Am-Present (*The Message*) and The God Who Sees, as immigration advocate and author Karen González writes in the appropriately-titled book.

This God is the one who equipped Moses and Aaron to go before the Pharaoh and ask that the slaves be set free—just for three days, mind you—so they could journey into the desert to celebrate and worship (Exodus 5:3).

And this same God is the one who promises that God’s people will *know* this God, simply because God is and God will: “I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord” (Exodus 6:6-8).

Even when, like the Israelites, we cannot hear because we have been beaten down in spirit by the harsh conditions around us, God is still present.

God still makes God's ways known, over and over again, for just as we seek and desire to be known and loved, God desires to be known and loved by us in return.

And I don't know about you, but that gives me hope.