

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Starter

Exodus 3:7-12

Yahweh says to Moses, “I have observed [seen] the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them” Here in verse 7, we hear, if we know how to listen, the voice of compassion – of involvement in the sufferings of the Israelites. I dislike the translation “observed,” because it smacks of the objective, dispassionate observation of the laboratory, which is not the meaning here at all. The whole verse is relational and responsive: that is, Yahweh God is responding to the need and distress of the slaves whose God now calls them “my people.” There is nothing objective or dispassionate here.

In Hebrew, to “see” and “hear” both imply engagement and response. The language does not separate thought from action, observation from response, understanding from caring. For me, the central statement is, “I know their sufferings.” Compassion means “suffering with,” entering with sympathy or empathy into the suffering of another. During the 1990's, “I feel your pain” became somewhat of a cliché, but restored to its full meaning, it expresses what Yahweh says to Moses here. God feels the people’s sufferings and is moved by them. To see or hear suffering is to respond to it with help; in the Hebraic way of thinking, if the observer does not respond, s/he did not truly see or hear. We retain similar ideas in our own speech. For example, if a wife says of an unsympathetic husband, “he didn’t hear me,” she doesn’t mean the man’s ears didn’t pick up the sounds her voice was making; she means his heart didn’t pick up her need to be heard and understood. Likewise, if the husband thinks, “She doesn’t see what I’m up against,” he’s regretting, not her dearth of information on his task, but her lack of appreciation for his struggle.

Yahweh sees, hears, and knows the sufferings of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Verse 9 repeats the assurance that the cry of the Israelites has reached Yahweh, and their God has seen their distress. Surely, this understanding and caring became part of every faithful Israelite’s expectation of the covenant God. *When I suffer, Yahweh sees my pain and hears my cries and cares.* Many of the psalms call on God to hear with this very expectation that for God to hear is for God to care and to help.

Verse 8 renews the promise of a land made to the ancestors but now within the context of Israel’s enslavement so that it becomes a promise of freedom culminating in their receiving a land of their own in which to live as Yahweh’s people. The Israelites are worse than homeless; they are enslaved. Yahweh promises to bring them up out of Egypt and into a land of their own, now occupied by other peoples.

In verse 9, God says to Moses, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” God works through people and has chosen Moses to be the person. Again

we hear God call the Israelites “my people.” There is nothing impersonal or theoretical here. There is not even just a principle – that God despises slavery and wills human freedom. Such a principle sounds right and true, except that it is impersonal, based on an ideal of justice but not on the particularity of love. It is the personal involvement of God here that is so outstanding. It’s not just principle that drives God here but passion. God’s compassion is aroused, and God is taking this enslavement and oppression very personally because the hurt is being done to God’s own.

“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt.’” That’s a very good question. We should not hear this question as false modesty or merely as a dodge, an attempt to duck out of the responsibility. Moses has already experienced failure as a would-be advocate of justice and arbitrator for his people. He is a fugitive because of his failed attempts to be a deliverer. Now God tells him, not just that he must return to Egypt and work for his people’s betterment, but that he must go to the king himself, the reigning pharaoh, and somehow manage to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. In reply to the man’s question of his own stature and capabilities, God gives the only word that matters: “I will be with you.” That makes all the difference.

A modern song, which our choir has sung, says, “I will go, Lord, if you’ll lead me; I will hold your people in my heart.” What we have seen here in Exodus 3 is that Yahweh God holds the people in his heart. Moses has much to learn, but he has the one assurance that matters: “I will go with you.” The dialogue of chapter 3 is not over yet, but the crucial word has been spoken.

Questions for possible discussion:

1. Can we today get a feel for the Old Testament’s relational language? Can we appreciate the difference between observing someone else’s distress and “seeing” it? Our society puts great emphasis on being objective, dispassionate, uninvolved. What have we gained from this approach to life? What have we lost?
2. What’s the difference between an omniscient, all-knowing, God and a God for whom knowing means caring? Read Psalm 139 from both viewpoints: God’s knowing all about us so that we have no secrets or, in the other view, God’s understanding us and caring too deeply about us to let us get away. How does one viewpoint make you feel? The other?
3. What’s the difference between a God who meets us with demands first and promises (rewards) later and, on the other hand, a God who meets us promise (hope) first and commandments (for our responses) later? *Do this, and I’ll reward you (I promise). Do that, and I’ll punish you (I promise). Or, here is my promise because I am making you my people. Pursue it. And here’s what you must do (and not do) to pursue it faithfully.* What’s the difference?