

“IMAGE ISN’T EVERYTHING”

Numbers 20:1-13

by Rev Alan Jackson

Candidates for public office, for example the current nominee for Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, find their character subjected to close scrutiny, with particular attention paid to the relationship between their private and public lives. For instance, we want to know if there is a clean relationship between what they say about their past and what really happened back then. Is there consistency between what they say they support in terms of policy and their decisions on record? Now, this desire to ensure that our would-be leaders are consistent in public as well as in private could seem rather odd to an outsider.

After all, we are a nation that generally doesn’t hesitate to separate private morality from the public sphere. For example, more often than not, religion is made out to be like a private hobby that is not allowed to impinge on decision at work or anywhere else in public. In fact, in our society everything from abortion to sexual orientation and practices are deemed personal choices that no one else should presume to stick their noses into. Frankly, moral relativism has become our cultural standard. Nevertheless, the public servant who is revealed to be an inconsistent hypocrite, who does not walk his own talk, is a prime target.

Well, as Christians we have our own take on such matters, and our lesson today may help draw this into focus. Today’s incident involving Moses is a bracing reminder that what goes on in our hearts matters a great deal to God. As a matter of fact, sometimes what is true in the privacy of our hearts is more important to God than what shows on the visible surface of our public lives.

Now, let’s take a closer look at the circumstances around the story. When you read the book of Numbers, by the time you get to chapter 20 you’ve grown accustomed to hearing the Israelites complain. In fact, their moaning and groaning will have become nauseatingly routine. First the people complain about something – in this case a lack of water. Then they wish either that they were dead or that they had never left good old Egypt. God’s anger is kindled. And finally, Moses and Aaron respond by falling flat on their faces, pleading before God.

Numbers 20:3-5 fits this pattern with monotonous predictability. But this time, surprisingly, God didn’t respond in anger. This time God agreed that the people needed something to drink, and he gave Moses instructions on how to meet this need. First, Moses was to fetch the staff from the Tabernacle. It was probably the same staff with which Moses turned the Nile to blood and which he held out in

parting the Red Sea. Then Moses was to take this staff to a certain rock, speak to the rock, and then stand back to watch fresh spring water burst forth.

Now if any of this gives you a sense of *déjà vu*, there's a reason. You can read an almost identical story in Exodus 17. Shortly after crossing the Red Sea, the people of Israel needed water. At that time God told Moses to take his staff and use it to whack a certain rock after which water would gush out. In Numbers 20, however, God altered the equation just a bit by telling Moses to talk to the rock, not hit it.

So Moses and Aaron gathered the people around the appointed rock. But instead of talking to the rock, Moses addressed the people. "*Listen up, you miserable rebels. Do we have to supply you with water from this rock?*" Then he took the staff of God, gave the rock two cracking blows, and streams of precious water gushed forth.

Now obviously Moses deviated from God's script. Just why he did so we don't know, although it certainly looks like Moses lost his temper. And who could blame him after all he'd been through? In verse 1 we're told that Moses' dearly loved sister Miriam died. It's possible he was grieving and feeling emotionally brittle when the people carped to him about water yet again, and even talked about wishing they were dead as part of their lament. Well maybe it just hit Moses the wrong way. Even in his sorrow these people would not clam up!

In any event, by verse 10 Moses was acting rather oddly. There is little agreement among scholars about how to take Moses' words in that verse. Some think that, with the people before him, Moses said, "*Well, shall we make water come out of this rock?*" – only to have the people respond with an affirmative cheer. In that case Moses was just trying to whip up enthusiasm for the miracle at hand.

Others think that the fact that Moses said, "*Must we bring water out of this rock,*" indicates that Moses was stealing God's glory. True, God had told Moses to bring the holy staff along, not to hit the rock with it, but to serve as a visible reminder that this miracle was going to be God's doing. The staff symbolized God's presence at the rock. But in verse 10 Moses may have been guilty of shifting the focus away from God to himself. In other words, maybe Moses was so wrapped up in his own emotions that, instead of using the staff to give God the glory, he used it for his own purpose in venting his frustrations.

Curiously, the miracle still happens. As far as the people are concerned, God has worked yet another wonder of providence for Israel. However, while the people were lining up at the rock to fill their jars, and buckets, God called Moses and Aaron aside and lowered the boom. Because they had not follow God's word, both Moses and Aaron were banished from the Promised Land.

To put it mildly, this was a most unanticipated turn of events. Granted, Moses disobeyed God. He may have let his personal feelings get the best of him. But doesn't God's response seem disproportionately harsh? After everything Moses had done in near-perfect obedience of God, after all that Moses had to put up with from this nettlesome group of people, does it seem right or just that God would so severely slap Moses down for one lapse?

There are some who would say that this story confirms their worst fears and suspicions about God. There are those who picture God as the cosmic disciplinarian, standing in heaven with a rolled-up newspaper, just waiting to swat us for the least little infraction of the rules. Where is the grace of God in this story? How could one little sin be so important that it ends up outweighing the incredible stockpile of good deeds that Moses had accumulated over the years?

If you ask those questions, you're not alone. Commentators would probably agree that the reasons for this punishment have provided one of the great puzzles in the history of biblical interpretation. I don't have a satisfactory explanation. Oh, we could point out that, although Moses would not enter the Promised Land, that didn't mean he would be damned for all eternity. He remained a beloved chosen servant of God. We could recall that at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, after Moses had reached a very advanced age, God gave him a panoramic view of the Promised Land. Then when Moses died, God tenderly buried him personally. We could point out that Moses has remained one of the most honored figures in salvation history. We could recall that he was one of the people seen chatting with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

So even though Moses got his wrist slapped pretty hard in this story, this is not the final word on Moses' ministry, life, reputation, or status in God's kingdom. Still, the reason why this failure resulted in God's intense displeasure remains something of a mystery – one that even the text of Numbers does not spell out or explain for us.

What we can say with some certainty, however, is that this story is one of many biblical examples that God really does examine our hearts. God is interested not just in how we appear to other people, but in how we operate in that most private sphere of our lives: our inner thoughts and feelings and intentions. Keep in mind that, as far as the people were concerned, Moses had not done anything wrong. They didn't know that God had told Moses to simply talk to the rock. For all they knew God had commanded Moses to strike the rock just like he had done back in Exodus 17.

In the public eye Moses had not flagrantly disobeyed God here. Even though Moses hadn't followed God's instructions, the miracle still happened as though he had. As far as the people were concerned, God granted their petition through Moses. Although there are some questions surrounding Moses' words in verse 10,

for the most part it is clear that Moses' actions did not detract from the glory of God in this miracle. In fact, the final word about this incident comes in verse 13 where it says that the Lord showed himself holy to the people through this miracle. God did get the credit. On the surface, all was well.

It looked for all the world like Moses was every bit as faithful a servant of God here as he had been countless times before. But on the inside, in his heart, Moses had not done right because he didn't have the right attitude. Just because everything turned out fine, just because no one else knew the difference, did not mean that all was well with Moses.

In other words, the issue here was Moses' moral integrity. And it is here that this story may provide a bracing reminder for us. Because today people seem to believe that what you think on the inside, what you say or do in the privacy of your own home or bedroom doesn't matter. So long as no one gets hurt, so long as you do not infringe on anyone else's freedom, so long as whatever you happen to believe or practice on the side doesn't affect your job performance, then it doesn't matter. And anyway, who's to say whether you're right, wrong, or otherwise on such private matters of the heart? That's your own business.

One of the scariest questions any of us can ask ourselves is this: what would I be willing to do if someone gave me an up-front, iron-clad guarantee that I'd never be caught? That question is just another way of asking how much the divine gaze of God matters to us. It's a vital question because there are many things we can engage in for which we will never receive public scorn or censure. As a matter of fact, some of the direst sins – including nearly all of the “Seven Deadly Sins” – don't show on the outside. In your heart of hearts you may be deeply angry or torn up with envy or riddled with pride or spiritually slothful or consistently greedy, and yet you can mask all of that so well in public that no one will ever know. Like Moses in Numbers 20, it can look for all the world like you are doing everything right in perfect piety, and yet in your heart you may be far from having the mind of Christ.

The core of integrity, of being a person after God's own heart, is recognizing that who we are on the outside has to be transparent to who we are on the inside. I think a case could even be made that what we do in public matters to God only to the extent that it is matched by what we feel and believe in private. Unhappily, in our current cultural setting, the very concept of integrity withers if you think that neither God nor anyone else should even be concerned with what you say, do, or believe in private. Once you blockade your heart from the divine gaze, then you cannot even access the topic of moral integrity.

By now it may seem that we've wandered far from Numbers 20. Yet I'd suggest that God's displeasure with the private Moses, despite a good public appearance, tells us something immensely important about the Bible's definition of

integrity. Integrity is embracing God's plan for your life and then living consistently with it. To have integrity is to be integrated. I'm not talking about being integrated simply within the confines of a little universe you've designed for yourself, but integrated in the sense of living faithfully within God's design.

Regrettably, none of us is fully integrated in this sense. Only Jesus can claim such integrity – and in that sense he is the most fully human being who ever lived. Jesus understood God's will, and he lived it in his every action and word and intention – even to the point of giving up his life. Now granted, as the Son of God, that came naturally for Jesus. The rest of us struggle and fail again and again. And it is only by God's grace that our failures are covered. But we can't use God's grace as an excuse. That grace is given not only to forgive but to re-form – to re-mold us into people who act and think and believe like Jesus.

In an age when we are told that “image is everything,” I find it instructive to recall that when God through the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the era of the church, God did not predict a day when he would make his people look good on the outside. No, God said that step one would be to put a new heart within his people. Ask yourself: are you as candidate for a transplant?

Let's pray:

Lord, I want to be a Christian – in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more loving – more holy – like Jesus – in my heart.

God, I thought I could make it on my own, but I've changed my mind.

Please change my heart.

αμεν