

Mosaic Mosaic
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
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Num 12:3

(BHS)

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד
מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

(KJV)

(Now the man Moses was very meek,
above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)

This devotion is for Pastor Appreciation Day, coming up on October 9. King James is quite woodenly literal here. You should be able to just follow along with most of it. “Above” in line 2 glosses the Hebrew “from all.” The most interesting word of course is *‘anaw* (say, “anav”), meaning “meek, humble, bowed.” It is hard to imagine Moses, the most humble man on earth, writing this about himself. So translations put this in parentheses as if it is a non-Mosaic interpolation. (Why do you think most of the Law of Moses wasn’t written in the first person, as if someone wrote *about* Moses, rather than it being written *by* him? E.g., it usually says, “Moses went up the mountain,” not “I went up the mountain.” What do you make of its predominantly non-autobiographical genre?)

The book of Numbers is full of little vignettes about Moses and Israel in the wilderness, a mosaic of stories that add up to showcase Israel’s obstinate resistance to the purpose and plan of Yahweh to save them. At every turn, the people murmured and complained, and this often led to God having to chastise them. (I teach this and remind my students that grumbling is a great sin against the Lord, like for example ... grumbling about your professor!) Within this literary mosaic is our verse, a comment on the great humility of Moses.

It speaks to the particular conflict being played out in Numbers 12. Moses had just transmitted “the spirit that was on him” to 70 elders to empower them to govern Israel (11:25). Think of it as the first ordination service. The seventy were empowered to prophesy, that is, to speak for God.

Apparently Miriam and Aaron were two of those new elders. The duo grumbled against Moses, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (12:2). In other words, Moses’ unique authority was being challenged by presumptuous ruling elders who wanted to be his equal. Here, the pastor’s humility is highlighted—in stark contrast to the elders’ effrontery.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. We are all too familiar with the thought process of Aaron and Miriam, aren’t we? How many pastors have dealt with elders that see themselves as an almost secular “Board of Directors,” as opposed to spiritual under-shepherds of Christ’s church? (Elders, in Presbyterian polity, are not the pastor’s employers. He is a “chief” among “equals.”) Elders can become jealous of the limelight and covet a share of the pastor’s special calling. When that happens, they emulate the offense of Aaron and Miriam.

Paul says that the mosaic of Mosaic stories was written for our instruction. They are negative examples of how not to be (1 Cor 10:11 – 12). He calls them “types” for us to avoid, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” Amen to THAT!

Humility goes against the grain of our human nature and of our self-absorbed culture. It takes a lot of faith to be humble in this world. It. Takes. A. Lot. Of. Faith. To. Be. Humble. Like Moses, you must clearly know whom you serve. You have to let go of thinking it is about you. You have to purposely resist promoting yourself. Intentionally seat yourself at the lowest place until the Master of the house says, come sit up here! And this is not easy. It is one of the hardest things for anyone to do.

But Jesus will help you. He is self-described as humble and lowly at heart. He would not break a bruised reed—let alone a damaged member of your congregation or a discouraged pastor. And when you are painfully undermined by overbearing people, when you are hurting, unappreciated and slandered, remember that he was too. Through his Spirit he will remind you of what your calling is—and what it is not. And perhaps whoever is causing you distress will see your lowly example and learn how to better follow Christ. Hey, anything is possible.

While Moses was humble, Yahweh stepped in and disciplined those misguided elders. And today, sometimes Presbytery must intervene to teach and lovingly but firmly confront Miriams and Aarons in the church.

Something to think about.