

At the Celebration of the Life of Moses B. Middleton

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The Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, Maryland

Wisdom 3:1-5, 9; Psalm 23; Romans 8:14-19, 34-35, 37-39; John 10:11-16

*Moses . . .* Everybody in this room, and so many others, as well, must have a story that begins, “*The first time I met Moses . . .*” Following this service, you will have an opportunity to share these and other stories of Moses, if you like, during the reception.

I have my own story (and the microphone); I will tell it now. The first time I met Moses was on one of my first Sundays at Redeemer. The prophet Moses must have been in the Old Testament reading for the day, because he was in my sermon. When *our* Moses shook my hand at the door after the service, he smiled at me, with a twinkle in his eye and said, “Moses. My name is Moses.”

I knew right then that I had encountered a dignified, wise and somewhat mysterious human being, the kind of person you are drawn to and look forward to knowing better.

Our Moses was as august as the prophet for whom he was named. *That* Moses, the prophet, was a great and powerful leader, God’s agent in liberating God’s people from slavery in Egypt. The most powerful empire of the day could not stop him.

The Moses we have known and loved was just as powerful a liberator. He led countless numbers of people out the darkness into the light, out of bondage into freedom. Not by standing out in front, holding at high volume, giving directions with great fanfare, as we might imagine the Old Testament prophet to have done, but walking quietly, gently alongside as a companion on the way.

Moses was a man practiced in listening with a wise and open heart. He had a way of simply and humbly being present, inviting people in out of whatever rough seas were raging, to rest with him beside the still waters. He didn’t have to say too much. His very being was calming and welcoming.

Having walked through the valley of the shadow of death himself, he knew all the dangers, pitfalls and fears. He was a realist, a fully incarnate being, and no fool. He would have no truck with anyone’s trying to fool themselves, or him. He knew when something less than truth was being lived or spoken, and he would let you know—firmly, gently—reassuring that the door is always open: *Come on in.*

In the gospel according to John, Jesus says of himself, “I am the good shepherd.” Not merely morally good and upright; maybe not even mostly that. Good as in attractive, beautiful, even; one the sheep are drawn to, one they trust and want to come to when he calls them. He knows them each by name. When they hear his voice, he gets through to them, to their place of deep need and capacity for trust.

There was something of this in Moses. He was not himself the Good Shepherd, of course. He would have been the first to tell you: he was one of the sheep. But over a lifetime he came to resemble his shepherd; he was a mentor, friend and sometime shepherd himself.

I know, a sheep can't become like its shepherd; this metaphor can only be stretched so far! But Moses was a channel for the love and compassion of the One whom he followed. People recognized that in him right away and wanted to be more like him: at peace with himself and the world, centered, grounded, utterly serene.

Another story of a first meeting with Moses, from a friend who had come new to a gathering where Moses was presiding. As the conversation unfolded, she realized that Moses called everyone there by name. When her turn came to speak, of course he did not know her name. She told him, and then she said, "Moses, I hope, in time, to know and call everyone here by name, as you do." He showed us how it is done, and what it can look like.

In another part of the Gospel of John, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (13:34-35) Moses lived enfolded in that love and in his quiet, unassuming way, drew us into that fold with him.

He knew in his bones what the Apostle Paul wrote to the first century church in Rome: nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ—"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation . . ." (Rom. 8:38-39)

By whatever name you call this One: God, Christ, Lord, Adonai, Allah, Vishnu, the Ground of Being, or by no such name, or no name at all: the Love and Goodness at the heart of the universe, that knows each one by name and through and through, holds us *all* in love; desires our well being and that of all creation, and desires that we will, in turn, have love and compassion for one another.

This is the One whose Spirit filled and sustained Moses, and made him a liberator of his people, an agent of healing and hope. This is the One who first called him out of darkness into light, out of bondage into freedom. This is the One who has welcomed him now into the fullness of love and glory, to the green pastures and still waters of home forever more.

Moses' work is done. It is ours, now, to pick up and carry on, because the work of love and compassion does not end, will not end, until the time when the Good Shepherd whom Moses served and belongs to gathers all things to Himself, and into one.