

02.22.26 ~ 1st Sunday in Lent

“You Are Not Alone!”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words to Remember

Exodus 18:13-20 NKJV

Pew Bible 61

¹³ And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. ¹⁴ So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, “What *is* this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?”

¹⁵ And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶ When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

¹⁷ So Moses' father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you do *is* not good. ¹⁸ Both you and these people who *are* with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing *is* too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. ¹⁹ Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. ²⁰ And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.

Leader: These Are the Words of God.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Exodus 18:21-27 NKJV

Pew Bible 62

²¹ Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them *to be* rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be *that* every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear *the burden* with you. ²³ If you do this thing, and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace.”

²⁴ So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵ And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. ²⁶ So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves.

²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went his way to his own land.

Leader: These Are Words to Transform!

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Oh, Holy Lord, we come before you again this week because we need you and we crave the fellowship of one another. We also come to honor the first Sunday in Lent as we begin the journey to the cross where Jesus, our Lord and Savior suffered, died, and rose again. Lent typically begins with confession, so let us take a moment to confess our sins of omission and commission. We need to remind ourselves how to rest, how to lead, delegate, and to receive your instructions and blessings. Our heads are so full we often don't hear you. We read your words from Scripture through your servants Jethro and Moses. Prepare and strengthen us for ministry to and with others as we build and review the rootedness of our faith. May our spiritual roots be fed to grow through the study of your word and our deep relationship with you. Speak through this message and messenger as we explore our theme. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thank you to David and Andrew for leading us in the Congregational Hymn Sing last week. As you might have guessed, the ones you requested we did not get to last week are in today's service.

As you know, the Lenten season began this week on Ash Wednesday, February 18th. It is the period of 40 weekdays before Easter in the Christian calendar or six weeks not counting Sundays, the time Jesus was in the wilderness desert before he began his official ministry. I hope you are enjoying the booklets, and if you don't yet have one, we have extras in the office downstairs. We are reading daily Scriptures that recognize Jesus Christ's life, baptism, desert experience, and sacrifices leading to the cross. Originally, Lent became a time of fasting for baptismal candidates, and later became a season of general penance, reflection, prayer, abstinence, spiritual renewal, and preparation before the celebration of Easter and Resurrection. In some Christian denominations, people fast from one habit or desired food (alcohol, TV, chocolate, dairy, soda, etc.), but I recommend adding a desired spiritual practice or discipline (praying more regularly, walking, consistent

Scripture reading, healthier foods, or serving in a new way). Your decision should draw you closer to Christ, whatever you decide.

It may seem odd to study an Exodus passage for this time, but I promise it will make sense as a preparation to Jesus' walk. The MACBF Clergy and Chaplain Spiritual Retreat is always a holy and restful time away after Christmas and before Easter where I refresh and renew for a couple of days with a facilitator, good food, fellowship, and surrounded by Sugarloaf Mountain, hiking trails, and a prayer labyrinth. Only this year we were iced in! Our leader, Rev. Dr. Carita Brown, led us through three sessions of prayer, meditation, reflection, expression, movement, and play, all elements important to physical and spiritual renewal.

One theme that kept popping up from the other ten pastors, chaplains, and one coach in attendance was trees! It may have been coincidence, but I think not. Two or more members actually sketched and talked about their spiritual growth being like a tree, roots, a trunk, and branches, so I felt it was a link to what we're doing this year! Today, however, we are speaking about the church more than individuals, so the key passage, broken into two sections, is an appropriate foundation. Allow me to share Scripture study insights from that retreat.

We all know who Moses was, and at the time of this passage, the Israelites were only two or three months out of Egypt after their escape from Pharaoh across the Red Sea. They were in the wilderness desert of Midian and textually this comes before Moses saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God, receiving the law, but chronologically, it is actually after the Ten Commandments. The biblical scribes placed the pericope here to align with Jethro's previous conversion to the one true

God, Yahweh. Just before our passage, and again in the book of Numbers you will see how the Lord provided for all their physical needs with water flowing from a rock at Mount Horeb and daily manna in the Sinai.

Let's meet Jethro, the sheep and landowner who gave his daughter, Zipporah, to Moses in marriage and provided a home for him in exile. Jethro, also called Reuel, was a priest and man of stature in his community. He came to visit Moses, hearing the testimonies of Moses and the people about God's provision for their safety and survival. He gave sacrifices to and celebrated God with all the people in worship. There was much joy until the next day when Moses went back to work, sorting through as judge all the people's complaints and conflicts. Jethro witnessed the long lines of people and everyone's frustration and exhaustion, so later that evening in private, this man of God offered wise fatherly advice. It took an outsider to notice two things: 1. Although called, leaders cannot manage all responsibilities alone; and 2. Although called to lead, leaders are not and should not lead alone. Many leaders teach and speak like Jethro but act like Moses, with a heavy burden to produce results.

Spiritually, we know God is in charge of the results, not we leaders; but mentally and culturally there is a pressure toward success or numbers. Jethro's advice (and church, I finally heard it!) is to lead others in service and not try to do all God has called us to myself. Jethro had experience with military systems and leadership. If Moses would continue to **teach** the laws of God, he could delegate the minor decisions to able bodied and intelligent men as judges to implement obedience to the new laws called the commandments and have enough bandwidth and energy to make the

major decisions on behalf of the people without exhaustion. There were enough people to serve as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens of people (these were military rank terms). Did you hear those numbers?

The social structure was similar to a Bedouin tribal sheik today, who sits as judge over his people. Civil judges received authority from Moses who received his authority from God. The issues he mediated were neighboring disputes or normal life conflicts, family feuds, and interpretation of the commandments and laws. Moses was obedient to his father-in-law and established a successful judicial court system. This story has become a valuable symbol of effective leadership, no matter the size of the church. Jethro challenged Moses to use his discernment skills to recruit people of good character with gifts of administration, stewardship, generosity, hospitality, prayer, or speaking. Moses relied on God's gifts and direction to do this, as must we.

Are we praying for unfamiliar faces, new families, and people who need Jesus? Our lesson does not just apply to Moses. Jesus was not alone in his incarnation, birth, ministry, on the cross or in the tomb! Did Jesus do all the work with the thousands who followed him? No! He had several spheres of companions: his inner core—John, James, and Peter; his personal team—the twelve disciples; his social community—the forty or fifty family relationships developed around Galilee, Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethany (Lazarus, Mary, Martha); and then the larger public circle he taught (thousands of his followers). In each of these, he guarded his energy and as he served and performed each miracle, he felt God's power leave his physical body until he could rest and recover. That

is a different sermon! But hear me this Lenten season. Jesus is our example for ministry. He taught his disciples; they recruited others of high character (mostly). Men and women of God's choosing were with Jesus often, helping him to fulfil his mission; they were even at the cross, the tomb, the upper room, on the road during Christ's appearances, and on the beach. But also, the triune God was present the whole time in both Moses and Jesus' life and death. These were not alone in their ministries and leadership! Neither are you. Neither are we alone. We have prayer warriors out there pulling for us, or we would not have survived and thrived these seven years of transition, pandemic, and personal loss. As we progress in Lent toward the cross, let us remember that and not compare ourselves. Open your heart to fresh faces, collaboration, teamwork, and unity. God is calling and maybe he is calling you in a new way. There is always room at this table, especially now. Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Dear Lord, we thank you for our teachers and leaders, Jethro, Moses, and especially your son, Jesus. Help us to digest these words and remember them when we begin to grumble or face exhaustion. Are you calling us to lead in a new way? Or calling us to be part of a project team or a prayer effort? How can we encourage church leaders, mission volunteers, and those who don't know Jesus? Strengthen and nourish our roots this season as we explore our faith and practices. May our energies and missions be multiplied through the resources we do have and those you are bringing our way! Bless us, Lord, in the holy name of Jesus, Amen.