

Numbers 12:1-16

Your best life is lived in the story that Jesus is telling.

As I was studying this week and thinking through how to open the text to you, I hit a block. Thankfully my sermon team was on the case.

As we drove to school I told the kids I needed a good illustration to tell the story of this Scripture. At a loss, they suggested I tell a “Milo the Mouse” story which I have not done in a long time. Our family's faithful character maneuvering through life's transitions. So I told them a story to match their moment...

Milo was drinking coffee so he could focus at school and how he had a really success day listening to the teacher and doing his work.

At the conclusion of the story, my youngest daughter, not short on opinions, announced “I don't like your story!” Then she proceeded to question why I had Milo drinking coffee instead of eating chocolate-covered espresso beans, and how I needed more character developments, how one teacher should be a bunny and another should be a dog...

She wanted to retell and change the story to fit her preference and liking.

It's one thing to want to change a fictional tale spun by your father during a car ride to school, but it is a picture of how we try to wrestle the story of redemption out of the hands of the author. Imaged in our text today, the story on the road to promise.

Life is best lived in the story Jesus is telling, that is unfolding by the power of his word. Some of our key character development comes when we recognize and embrace it.

We are at the final of three acts of rebellion in Numbers 11 & 12. If you remember, in chapter 11 the people complained about the journey and God burned the outskirts of the camp. Moses interceded and the fire died down. Then the people

complain about the lack of meat, and Moses has a leadership crisis. God proves his power and a curse falls upon those that lusted for the food of slavery.

Here, Miriam and Aaron throw shade on Moses. What is really envy creates displeasure with their role in God's story. Rejecting the way of Yahweh - his anointed prophet and mediator.

While we are looking at this story we will arrive at the bigger story of a truer Moses...

Rejection Leads to Punishment

Miriam and Aaron. Sister and brother of Moses with what looks like a family quarrel.

There are many angles here - all lead to challenging, rejecting God's plan and His execution of bringing the people into the promised land.

Begins with racism that veils envy of Moses.

Miriam and Aaron "spoke out against Moses because of the Cushite woman he has married..."

First we want to feel the family strife here. Anyone have experience with something like this? Older sister coming down on you - disapproving of choices you have made, for who you married! Here it is because someone of a different ethnicity is in the family.

We like to think humanity has progressed beyond this but it has been an issue since Babel.

The Cushite woman. There are a few theories as to who this woman is. We know Moses had a wife from Midian named Zipporah. Has she died and this is a new wife? Was this description of her as perhaps Cush and Midian could describe the same place? Or what seems most likely, another wife, from what is now Ethiopia or Sudan (Nubia). Either way, this is a dark-skinned woman. She is different.

Ethnic purity is a thing for Israel - from God that the people wouldn't be tainted by idolatry. But taken too far by some, as even the Lord establishes the same law for Israelites and those sojourners among them.

Maybe the complaint was in response to the "rabble" that instigated the grumbling about the food, which could have been foreigners.

But it's actually an angle to challenge the role God has given to Moses. They, Miriam in particular, don't like the story being told.

Numbers 12:2 "And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it." (ESV)

Envy. 'Moses isn't great, Yahweh has spoken through others.'

We are not sure of their goal here. Moses' intervention kept the fire down. He has had struggles but given what he's working with he is a successful leader!

This seems to be more about Miriam and Aaron.

"This protest "was not just a case of petty family jealousy, for Aaron, Moses' brother, was also the high priest, and therefore a supreme religious leader and most holy man in Israel; while Miriam, his sister, was a prophetess and thus head of the spirit-filled women (Exod 15:20f.). Here, then, is an alliance of priest and prophet, the two archetypes of Israelite religion, challenging Moses' prophetic position as sole revelatory mediator between God and Israel." R. Dennis Cole

God had shown his ability to raise up leaders and speak through them. But Moses' anointed leadership is too much for them and they complain. And the LORD heard it.

[I suppose some may preach this text as "don't complain about your spiritual leaders" As if any challenge to a pastor is forbidden. NT changes things in that all believers are indwelt by the Spirit and have access to the story God is telling. No more high priest other than Jesus. While honor is due and trust can be given, it is not to be blind and certainly not to perpetuate abuse.]

Important to see this is more a problem with God than with Moses. They want to put God in his place, under their authority.

We do this all the time. From the lie in the garden, “did God really say?” We go on questioning and rescripting God in our likeness. Make him “my God” akin to “your truth.”

It comes out as a rejection of what God says is best. A diminishing of sin. Pretending we are not in need of forgiveness.

“What is more, we can easily confuse our personal interpretations of God’s Law with the Law itself, so that we look down on anyone who seeks to obey God’s Law in any way other than the way we deem “correct.” If we have the power to do so, we may then bind the consciences of others to do as we say. If we don’t have the power to compel others to follow us, we may look down on them as “unspiritual” and may then gossip and grumble to others about these people’s “deviant” behavior. In either case we have set ourselves up as masters and judges of others in a realm of which God alone is Lord and Judge.² Christian liberty — the freedom to apply God’s Law in good conscience, untrammelled by the traditions and teachings of men, however well-intentioned — is an important Biblical principle.” ID

Here Moses, the humble one won’t respond.

“This parenthetical statement probably came from the narrator rather than from Moses. It suggests that Moses would have let the challenge go unanswered. “It was Yahweh who heard it and took it upon himself to answer it” (T. R. Ashley).”

“Suddenly!”

Vindication comes quickly, as all three (Miriam, Aaron, and Moses) are summoned by God, who then points out Moses’ unique qualities, as seen in the 11-line poem in 12:6–8.

Numbers 12:6–8 “And he said, “Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. [7] Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. [8] With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form

of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (ESV)

Moses has a unique role as God’s anointed. While God gives visions and dreams to some, with Moses he is intimate, direct.

“Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant?”

They had witnessed redemption in the exodus; mercy and provision in the wilderness. And instead of embracing the story they want to change it. Beyond their authority.

I have a number of conversations with people who tell me how they think God would act. I get the inclination but each time I think and ask, “on what authority can you determine what God does?”

We want to be above God and it is a rejection of him that leads to punishment.

Here his anger is kindled and Miriam, seemingly the lead character in the complaining, is left leprous. Scaly skin, white and flaky like snow.

“Don’t miss the appropriateness of the punishment. Miriam had condemned Moses because of the color of his wife’s skin. The penalty fit her crime.” Tony Evans

Aaron, humbled, cries out to Moses, and Moses cries out to Yahweh. **Numbers 12:13** “And Moses cried to the LORD, “O God, please heal her—please.” (ESV)

Mercy here is being outside the camp for 7 days and God waiting for Miriam to be made clean before moving the camp. Then they set out and camp in the wilderness of Paran.

“Paran is the region just south of the Promised Land. Despite their unbelief and complaining, God has brought them to the edge of their inheritance. The only question is whether they will have the faith and courage to take from God’s hand what he has promised.” To go along with his story of redemption.

The story doesn’t end with Moses as the anointed leader though...

Repentance Leads to Grace

Where Moses pleads for mercy for those rejecting God's story, mercy comes. Greater mercy however comes with the intervention of a truer Moses, a greater servant.

“He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD.”

Christian readers may see in this description of Moses' unique mediating role a foreshadowing of Christ, the prophet greater than Moses.

A word of approval we will see concerning Jesus.

Matthew 3:16–17 “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; [17] and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (ESV)

Matthew 17:2–5 “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. [3] And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. [4] And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” [5] He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (ESV)

This is Jesus. The God-man who took on flesh, lived obedient as the true Israel, set apart for God, and gave of himself after proclaiming the kingdom. Dying a death sin deserved to give righteousness to those that trust in him. The One who satisfies the longings of our heart with mercy and grace, life in him. Redemption and renewal.

“No other prophet of earthly origin had been as intimate with God as Moses. But the Son, who came from the Father's side as our ultimate Prophet, has most fully made him known. We therefore look happily to Christ alone for grace and truth.”

GTB

Acts 3:17–22 “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. [18] But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. [19] Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, [20] that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, [21] whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. [22] Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. (ESV)

As the philosopher Hegel once astutely observed, “The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.”

He comes to bring abundant life, to bring forgiveness if we will be content with his story.

Matthew 10:30–33 “But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. [31] Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. [32] So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, [33] but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (ESV)

What does it mean to deny, or reject Jesus? Living in unbelief. Thinking the cross wasn’t sufficient, that you are too far gone for grace. It is reasoning away sin, thinking that because you arrived sinful you should stay that way. It is a refusal to submit to his ways...

Instead we are called to repentance and belief, turning from all that rejection and trusting Jesus.

“Contentment is not a naive closing of the eyes to the difficulties that face you in your situation. Rather it is a solid assessment of who you are in Jesus Christ and a sure confidence that, no matter how difficult your life may be, it comes to you personally from the hand of your sovereign heavenly Father.” And he has your best in mind.

And because we have revelation of God in Scripture we know the story he is telling. What keeps us when it is hard, how we rejoice when it is good, and the glory we look to through it all. We know how it all ends, or shall we say begins.

Even those that reject his story now have hope of his grace... The religious elite of the first century rejected Jesus and sent him to a criminal's death. Still he prays as Moses did...

Luke 23:33–34a “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [34] And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (ESV)

Jesus stands today, having won forgiveness on the cross - beating death at his resurrection - giving out grace to those who cry out to him - “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner!”

“Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned.”

Grace given. Sinners made righteous by the blood of Christ. Faithfulness granted through Jesus.

Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...

His way is best. It will mean giving up what is less, but it's a beautiful story that will go on forever.

Your best life is lived in the story that Jesus is telling.

His story is not fatalistic. It's learning to trust him with the outcome, crying out for help as we go.

Will you let his story stand? Will you be settled in his grace?

Repent and believe. Maybe for the first time, maybe for the millionth time, that times of refreshing may come in Christ.

This is a story of rescue, of redemption, of transformation, reshaping, all sad things becoming untrue, it is a story of renewal.

Let's live it, and make Jesus known in the telling.