

MOSES & GEORGE

It has seemed obvious since I was a young boy that Moses and George Washington are two of the greatest leaders of all time, each the founder of a country – a nation – and therefore of a culture and a spiritual legacy that have impacted the lives of millions of people. It has probably been obvious to you long before it was to me that there are fascinating and eerie similarities between the two men and their stories. Happily you know their stories, because there will be so little time to get into them this morning. And doubtless you will be perplexed at all the things I leave out. But we are a church – a worshipping community – not a history department. We can only honor Moses and George by walking the WAY of faithfulness and devotion ourselves. Shrines that merely remind us of the past are a great blasphemy. That which awakens us and calls us into our own lives – calls us to serve and be part of the unseen Kingdom of God going on all around us, even unto eternity – that is a great beatitude. No matter how humble and unsung we think our lives are, that is always the choice: blasphemy, or beatitude – life, or death. And of course, all our heroes walked this razor’s edge between life and death. We think they did it very well. We think they “won,” in some fashion or another. It is important to remember that when they were living it through, they did not know how things would turn out at the time. They stayed true to what they believed God wanted of them, and let it come out however it would.

Moses and George Washington can each stand on their own with no problem or approval from any of us. But if they also had parallel destinies, that makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. No surprise, in one sense, since we believe in an intelligent Creator. But stumbling onto bits and pieces of the Creator’s pattern and purpose is still awesome for us. I have no need to persuade or convince you of any of this; I just want to talk about it.

Moses and George Washington both founded idealistic and altogether religiously inspired nations. Both were deeply religious men who believed they were instruments of God. Both encountered tyranny and ended up risking their lives to confront and change it: “Let My People Go.” And you cannot just type or say the phrase. It must be spoken with a passion and a purpose that pour your whole life in behind it.

Both George and Moses were strangely reticent, slow of speech, shy, humble men in their personal lives, yet uncompromising in their principles

and purposes. Both took enormous personal insult, betrayal, and flak from both friend and foe, without much attempt to protect themselves or to retaliate. Yet they were fierce indeed to protect the interests of the people – even the people who often were not supporting or helping very much, though their lives, too, were at stake.

It is impossible to believe that either man could succeed at the hare-brained, impossible task that he took on. If anybody had written a novel about the life of either Moses or George, we would immediately say that the plot was ludicrous and unbelievable. We would say that the author had not bothered to think things through, deal with realities, or give us any plausible reason to imagine that events could transpire in such a ridiculous way. Pharaoh and the King of England each played with a full deck, but Moses and George each had fives, sevens, tens, and Jacks – all in different suits – and that was all!

Moses grew up with a stepmother; George would have been better off if he could have done the same. Jethro was Moses' father-in-law and Lawrence Washington was George's older brother, and both were mentors and role models for our two heroes. Both Moses and George crossed water in a dramatic, miraculous, surprise event – to “win” freedom. Crossing the Red Sea and Crossing the Delaware River are dissimilar miracles in our memory, yet strangely they are similar and serve a similar function in the two stories. Both Moses and George endured great bitching and enormous moaning from their followers, so much so that it almost makes the enemy seem like a secondary problem. At moments, the people they were trying to lead and save were recalcitrant, ungrateful people who would say things like: “Let's go back to the old gods of Egypt.” “We would be better off never to have broken from England.” “And please, if you must save us, at least do so without costing us anything or putting us in any risk or danger.”

Both men had strong, sometimes contentious wives, and their children (stepchildren in George's case) probably complained of being neglected. But we have no time to get into that. Moses had Korah, and George got Benedict Arnold. Jefferson and Aaron had more than a little in common too, including a “golden calf.”

George was particularly cautious about trusting allies (including France) and warned those coming after him to be cautious too. “If you let the foreign gods in here, what makes you think they will not try to take over?” And of course, many have pointed to the direct parallels between

the Covenant People – Israel – and the New Israel, which Pilgrims and many of our best leaders believed was the destiny being brought about by God in the New World. Whatever today’s schools say (or leave unsaid), to tell George’s story apart from God is as silly as trying to tell Moses’ story apart from God.

It will not be as meaningful to most of you as it is to me, but George was born February 11, 1732. A change in the calendar during his lifetime means that, using *our* calendar as reference, he was born February 22, 1732. A few years back, I stumbled upon some esoteric Jewish tradition which claims that Moses’ birth was always associated with Pisces. Whether true or not, both men played with a “Cool Hand Luke” kind of nonattachment. I do not mean to imply that they were uncaring. They cared so much that they were attached to something beyond what others could see. They did not quit or give up, when any sane person would have. They lose, and lose, and retreat, and play for time, and lose some more – until they win. And still today, looking back with the hindsight that is supposed to make things clearer, how can you find what either man was counting on or hoping for? What did they see in “their picture” that made them think it was worth going on – worth any more strife, or death, or sacrifice? Whatever they were seeing, it was not of this world. Neither man had a chance in Hell of winning anything but disaster for himself and his people. With rags on their feet they marched out of Egypt – and out of the British Empire. And of course, both Egypt and the British Empire were determined that they should not go. And both Empires, in their time, were the most powerful on the face of the earth. Ah, Moses and George – what in the world did you think you were doing?!

Moses’ people were angry, now having to gather the straw for the bricks they made. They wished they had never heard of Moses. Their lives were now far harder than before Moses came to help. George could not get money or supplies or equipment for his army. The Congress was disorganized and uncommitted. George went into battles and his own generals would not follow his orders. They undercut his strategy, and some openly challenged his authority and tried to supersede him. Sometimes he used them anyway, for a while.

Now, before I get us all totally lost in this sea of comparisons and hints and possible parallels, it is time to limit the field. I am hoping you will go on adding in what you know, but much as I hate to, I am going to choose just three items. Using the imagery from Moses’ life, let’s talk about *The Murder*, *The Mountain*, and *The Promised Land*.

How many great men can you name who do not struggle with terrible reputations? Moses, we think, may have been young and impetuous. In any case, if you were Satan and you smelled the destiny of the Deliverer (*Moses* means “delivered one,” or “deliverer”), would you maybe try to arrange to get him out of Egypt? Moses killing the Egyptian guard was a really dumb move. What could it accomplish? In any case, Moses killed the Egyptian who was beating his people. And Moses had to run for his life – flee from Egypt. At first glance, the Sinai seems as desolate as the moon. How could Moses’ life there have anything to do with the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt? Well, he met Jethro and his own wife-to-be, Zipporah (bird) – and he learned the Sinai wilderness like the back of his hand. And the “godforsaken” place turned out to be reeking with the presence of God. But from any human point of view, Moses’ life was over – he was just putting in time. He could never go back to Egypt. He was a murderer, an outlaw, a fugitive.

Was George a murderer? In 1749, the Ohio Company had secured a grant from the British Crown of half a million acres, contingent upon building a fort in the Ohio Valley and establishing at least two hundred families there. The Indians were told that this would make them rich in fur trade. But the French also wanted the valley and told the Indians it was a plot to steal their land. The idea was to build the fort at the Forks of the Ohio (Pittsburgh, to us), but for the moment they settled for building a warehouse and trading post at Wills Creek in the Shenandoah Valley (near-side of the Allegheny Mountains).

England and France were facing each other in what we would call a “cold war” across most of the world. Both wanted the Ohio Valley, and in 1753 the French began fortifying a route between Lake Erie (which they controlled) and the Ohio River system. Three French forts were built: Presque Isle (now Erie); LeBoeuf (near present Waterford, the other end of the portage to French Creek); and Venango (now Franklin, at the meeting of French Creek and the Allegheny River). From there, it was clear drifting downstream to the Forks, where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet – where the Ohio Company intended to build its fort.

The Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie (also an important shareholder of the Ohio Company and friend of Lawrence Washington), was very concerned because the territorial claims of the Crown were being defied – and because if the French controlled this territory, the Ohio Company, in which he was heavily invested, would go out of business. He wrote to his government in alarm, and in October of

1753 the reply came back: Virginia should build forts on the Ohio and *send an emissary* to see if the French were really on British soil. If so, the French should be required to depart. And if they refused, wrote King George II, over his own signature: “We charge you to drive them out by force of arms.”

Who would be this “emissary”? It was over the mountains and dangerous, there were no roads, and most folk figured they had plenty of problems right where they were. They needed somebody used to the woods (a surveyor perhaps, who had mapped a good deal of wilderness territory already). Young and strong and willing, George was chosen. On October 30, 1753, he was ordered to proceed into the wilderness, make contact with the Indians, find out where the French forces were, assess their strength, discover their positions – and politely but firmly demand that they withdraw from English territory.

George was twenty-one years old and he was about to become the catalyst that would start the Seven Years War between France and England. He shed the first blood that set Europe ablaze and cost the lives of 853,000 soldiers and hundreds of thousands of civilians (according to Frederick of Prussia). He would be accused of assassinating the French diplomat, Jumonville, and killing or taking prisoner the rest of his company – firing on them without warning. “A monument of perfidy that ought to enrage eternity,” according to one French writer.

There is usually more than one side to a story. George was unaware of his perfidy. The band of men he had brought into the wilderness were poorly equipped and underpaid, and he had already sent a number of them home for being undisciplined and insubordinate. The rest, despite his youth, had succumbed to his unusual charisma. And George was not fooled by French forces under orders to attack if it was to their advantage and to play diplomat if not. Besides, what was a French diplomat (Jumonville) doing marching around in British territory with nine hundred French soldiers better equipped than any of George’s men and with plenty of artillery? George outmaneuvered them and surprised them with his “down-home recruits” – no British regulars – and despite being greatly outnumbered.

At first congratulated and sincerely thanked by those who sent him, then “the diplomats” took over. They said George had attacked and killed, without warning, a party of peaceful diplomats. He was branded a murderer, and many supposed he had disgraced himself beyond hope of

recovery. A few months later in a second battle, now with Jumonville's brother in command of the French forces, the French offered a treaty on the battlefield. (And the statistics of this battle are argued about to this day: George lost 100 of his 400 men, dead or wounded; the French lost 300 of their 900 [they claimed 2 dead, 17 wounded].) In one of the ironies of history, it was on July 4th – not the one we celebrate, but in 1754 – that George signed the treaty with the French. The treaty, along with calling off hostilities, admitted that the French were acting solely to avenge the assassination of their diplomat, Jumonville. That locked in and made official the charge of deceit and murder against George. Of course, he could not read French, but he *was* guilty of being young and inexperienced enough to trust the honor of an enemy officer. A valuable lesson. And years later, when the French were our greatest allies in the Revolutionary War, George was possibly the only leader we had who was determined that French forces would not go on to help us out of the British frying pan and into the French fire. He never trusted them again.

Both Moses and George, then, started out with ruined reputations. Both were murderers. Both seemed to have lost any chance for prominence or meaningful leadership in the future. But we must now skip past huge events and trials – the Exodus; the Red Sea; the Revolutionary War; crossing the Delaware River; and then, in retreat, the surprising victory at Princeton. But what was it all about – where was it all leading?

When I was a kid, it was hard for me to realize that the real excitement was not the Red Sea or the confrontation with Pharaoh, but the Covenant on Mount Sinai. What good was the Passover or the Exodus if it did not go anywhere or lead to anything? The entire drama culminated in the Covenant: this people must be God's people. They made a Covenant with God to be a holy people, a different people, God's own people ... that the Way they lived would be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), drawing all people *back* to God – their Creator – and *into* a Way of Life that would be beautiful for everyone: full of respect, fair dealings, and cooperation – full of prosperity and peace.

In the same way, all of George's efforts were leading to the Constitution. What good was the Revolutionary War – all the sacrifice and death and hunger and freezing – unless it culminated in the formation of a new country – a new Way to Live? But on what basis?

The representatives at the Constitutional Convention had unanimously elected George as their President. They were attempting something altogether

new under the sun. There were no precedents to violate, but none to steer by either. And after struggling to bring all the opinions and interests into enough alignment to produce a document, it was also necessary for nine of the thirteen states to ratify it in order for it to go into effect. No country yet. Without a Constitution, anarchy – a band of aimless individuals. “In order to form a more perfect union ...”

“I almost despair,” George wrote at one point, “... and repent having any agency [part] in this business.” When finished, he knew it was far from perfect, but considered it the best that could be done (agreed on) at the time. He took comfort in the amendment process, and hoped the future would go on improving the Constitution. But it was a place to start – and a very good one.

Nor had George been willing to compromise just to move on – just to make everybody happy. They were hard-fought, exhausting meetings. Some precepts were too important to give up. At the Constitutional Convention (1787), George said: “If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God.”

Late in June 1788, ten months after George himself had signed the Constitution, ten states had ratified it. News of the last two came at the same time, putting the Constitution into effect. On February 4, 1789, George was unanimously chosen by the Electoral College as our first President – inevitably and absolutely necessary. On February 13, 1793, George was sentenced to a second term. (And that was exactly how he felt about it.)

The truth is, we can hardly imagine it happening apart from George Washington’s patient, inspired, determined leadership. Monroe, writing to Jefferson: “Be assured, his influence carried this government.” George was the oil and the glue. For unity, he was always looking for the common ground beneath the controversy, refusing to take personal insults to heart – though there were many, and increasingly so throughout his life. But do not be careless about compassion; George, like Moses, could be as hard as nails when it would affect the good of the purpose itself.

The Constitution of the United States and the Covenant on Mount Sinai (Torah) – they have twin purposes, and each is the culmination of the effort, courage, sacrifice, and devotion of these two amazing leaders. The Covenant and the Constitution are great beacons of light for a better

life. They solve no problems automatically, but a people who would live by them would become a beacon of light themselves. A nation that lived by the precepts of either the Covenant or the Constitution would be a miracle on the face of the earth – a beautiful, caring, Godly people, drawing all people to come share in the ways of a better life.

Moses and George each paved this way by incredible faithfulness, sacrifice, courage, and leadership – a way into “The Promised Land.” Of course, their lives share one more likeness: The people would not keep the Covenant. The people would not keep the Constitution. Many have tried. Some have succeeded. But the Promised Land has never happened in fullness. Greed, self-interest, factionalism, fear, carelessness, forgetfulness ...

It breaks your heart. It breaks the heart of the whole world. We all mean well, at least from time to time, but we cannot seem to get consistent enough, dedicated enough, cooperative enough, inspired enough – at least not all at the same time or for long enough – to let the New Way take effect. Stabs of light here and there to be sure. Great courage and sacrifice and effort all along, or we would be far worse off than we are. But always it is so watered down, so partial, so tenuous and temporary. It does not take much to kill the dream. Somebody is always cheating on their income taxes; somebody is always shy of their tithe. Does it take a genius to see how many resources it costs our country to try and force everybody to pay their fair share toward the common cause? And most people do not honor, respect, or keep either the Covenant or the Constitution because they love it. For most of us, most of the time, it is an attitude of: “You have to catch us – and make us.” What do we suppose “sin” (alienation, isolation) is about? Freedom means we do not have to care? Freedom means, “I’ve got mine – to hell with you”? Is that what Moses and George were about? What the Covenant and the Constitution are calling us to?

Yet we realize that we all goof, from time to time. It is so easy to get angry at those who break the Covenants, because they are killing the dream – destroying the Promised Land. So there has to be compassion, a way to forgive and restore those who destroy the dream *and then repent* – who want to come back in and live for it again. But do we also forgive and restore those who do not repent – so they can go on betraying the Covenants and killing the Promised Land more and more effectively?

It gets heavy, even discouraging, if you have been around for very long – if you have paid much attention. The dream of black and white together ... of living in a community where nobody steals your money or

your wife ... where everybody pulls together to make a better life for all ... and all the other things inherent in both Covenant and Constitution – it seems a noble and beautiful dream. But life is not that way for any of us all the time. For most of the world’s people, it is not that way very much at all. How do you keep your hope and your courage? How do you keep from being depressed?

There was another Man between the two we have been talking about. He came to tell us that the Hope was not in this world. He came to tell us that we could not keep the Covenants – not by our own power or determination. We needed a new heart within us – needed to be born again – needed a Savior. And then we could live by a *New Covenant* – not one we thought would work in this world, but one deeper and far beyond this world. A Covenant that did not depend on anything or anyone around us, though He said we would discover that others all around us were living by the New Covenant too. “Come live in this New Kingdom,” He invited. “It is alive and going on all around you. It cannot be controlled by this world, and it does not end at death. You can live by its light, and you can do many things in this world by its purposes and power – though often the world will not thank you. And if you chose it, I will be with you – to the close of the age and ‘til the end of time.”

PRAYER

We come into Your presence in humility and wonder, Lord – awed by Your love, grateful for Your mercy.

Much of our conscious lives, we are programmed to look for answers, to come up with solutions, to try to understand all mystery and meaning. In Your presence, we relax. In Your presence, we are safe enough to admit that it is all bigger than we are. We cannot fix it or make it come out the way we want it to. We are finite. You are the Infinite One. How very comforting that we are not “as good as it gets” – that we are not the final solution ... to anything.

Down all the long corridors of time and space, no one has ever come to this earth and found an easy life. We like to pretend, we like to imagine, we like to hope ... that maybe it has been or might be or someday *will* be easy and happy and peaceful, especially for our children.

But it is never true. And for those who lose their way – and for those who find *Your WAY* – it is always harder and harder.

It is heartbreaking that we do not understand each other's trials more; that we do not support and help each other more; that we do not forgive and restore each other faster, deeper, and with greater grace. But we have many false hopes which keep us believing that maybe we can make it without You, and this keeps us proud and willing to judge each other a little longer.

But we are learning, Lord. And each day, we are more grateful for Your love and grace and mercy. And so, we have no quarrel with other faiths, and we hope that somehow You are in them and inspiring them. Because You are our last chance – and our only hope.

We never come to You, truly, until we have tried everything else we can think of. Sad, as some say, but true. So we come to You now – grateful for Your offer to feed and fill us. And grateful that You are neither vindictive nor resentful of all our foolish hopes and false devotions. You are our last chance – and our only Hope.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come, we pray.