

Even at the foothills of the mountain you could sense that this was a spiritual place. 2500 metres rising out of a desert plain, piercing the heavens and providing what you might sense was the entrance to the very throne room of God.

You knew that if you spent the day climbing to the summit you would be rewarded by feeling both colossal and miniscule. Colossal because you could see for miles and miles around you, take it all in, understand the lay of the land, catch even better than a bird's eye view. And miniscule because you were standing on a veritable monstrosity, too big to really comprehend, and this monstrosity was right in the middle of a huge emptiness of desert all around you.

This mountain, a sacred place for centuries before and centuries to come was known as Mt Horeb and then later as Mt Sinai. And at the foothills, there was a shepherd, climbing the rocks looking for a stream of water to refresh his flock.

He had come to this place not for the sake of the sheep, they weren't really enjoying this very rough and dry terrain at all. He had come to make some peace with the world. He was a murderer on the run.

Everyday Moses remembered the moment he became a fugitive. He was a Hebrew, an Israelite who as a nation had become the slaves of the Egyptians through blatant racial discrimination. It had all started about 400 years ago when there had been a severe famine in a land known as Canaan. A man named Jacob brought his family down to Egypt in order to survive—there were about 70 of them.

They were given refuge in Egypt and simply stayed on and multiplied. At a growth rate of 4.9% per year for 400 years until Moses, there were about 2 million of them. The Egyptians hated these immigrants and forced them to work for them as slaves.

Moses shouldn't even exist. When he just a child there was a decree that all boys born to the Hebrew women should be drowned in the Nile. He should've died with all the others. His mother had told him how she had hidden him for a few months before it became too hard for her. There was a point where she had to make a choice between the risk of hiding him, which she couldn't do for ever, or just getting rid of him somehow into a new life.

She said she always knew he was special and decided that she would let God would look after him. It was a gut wrenching experience for her to make a basket, put her child in it and set it afloat in the Nile river. Never had her faith been tested so much and never had she had experienced rewards like she was about to.

The Pharaoh's daughter spied the basket, became clucky with the baby, but didn't want the mess of it all so wanted a nanny, and who should become that nanny but Moses' mother. Not only was she looking after her own son, she was also getting paid for it and lived in the lap of luxury as she watched her son be adopted by the pharaoh and grow up all educated and stuff. It was amazing! She took the opportunity when she could to tell Moses about God and his faithfulness to his people.

Moses didn't really like listening to that because when he looked at how the Egyptians treated the Israelites he couldn't see God in that. His mother reminded him that one of his distant descendants Abraham had been told that his children would be in bondage for about 400 years but God would bring judgement on their oppressors and they would leave the land with great possessions.

Moses didn't really believe her. How on earth could that happen? It just made him more angry with the situation when she did her religious silly talk. "Look around you mum, see that there is no God that will save you! There's no strength in anyone to start a revolution. The people are too weak, there aren't enough men to lead them because they are all killed at birth. Listen to me mum, there is no hope."

"Look around you, this society doesn't care about our religion, it doesn't care that we think that Jesus will return. It calls it silly talk. There is a cold hard reality to life, that it sucks for everyone. No-one is immune from pain and suffering even when you have faith. There is no hope in religion is there? The only thing we can do is find escape through our faith or the things that distract us. Religion is just another distraction. Have your faith, but don't expect that it will answer problems. It's clear to me that God doesn't do anything in this world."

But one day, Moses was so annoyed with the treatment of the Israelites, the sheer brutality that made a nation 'groan' to their God, the total disrespect, the way they were

treated as tools rather than as people, the way they were demoralised, ridiculed, despised, made his gut churn.

He was also conflicted about why he should be in such a privileged position while his fellow Israelites suffered. And he felt stink about that. He felt even more of a burden and then one day he saw a slave driver beating the pulp out of some elderly woman and it was just too much. He took his knife and stabbed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

He regretted it, he knew he hadn't made a difference, but he thought that at least the Hebrews would look at him with a new kind of respect. They wouldn't lump him in with the rest of Egyptians or even worse regard him as a traitor.

In some small way it made him feel like he was on their side, it made him feel Hebrew.

But the very next day he saw a couple of Hebrews fighting, and he said to them, 'dudes, are you mad? Why are you venting your anger about the suffering you are having to endure on one another? Don't you see that . . .'" and before he could finish the one who had started the fight said, "so what are you gonna do? You gonna kill me like that slave driver yesterday? What makes you so great? You're just a murderer who . . .'" and before he could finish his sentence, Moses had run off in fear.

And now, Moses sat on a rock on the side of a mountain. There were some wonderful things about this life. Beautiful scenery, fresh air, lazy wandering for pastures, a simple life. But he could never settle into it too much. Because he had seen the horror of a nation. He dreamt it every night. He saw vividly the blood on his hands after he had slain that Egyptian. He felt guilt and remorse, and the fear that he will be found out. He carried this over him everyday and though he tried to escape it by coming to this mountain in the wilderness it just followed him.

He believed in God, but he didn't think that God was very nice. He didn't believe in God's power or in God's love. He just knew that God was part of the religion.

He was just a disillusioned fugitive shepherd looking after sheep for his father in law.

Something was burning. He thought it best that he check it out and as he walked toward the smell he noticed a bush that was on fire. But the thing about the bush was that it was not charring or being consumed.

It was eerie. He felt like someone would feel if they threw a ball in the air and it just stopped before it came down. Moses treaded carefully. He scratched his head, and sat on a rock nearby to watch it and puzzle over it.

“Moses.” Came a voice from out of nowhere. He froze. This was really scary. And he began cowering away slowly, quietly hoping that this was just a weird experience that would soon be all over and tucked away as some party anecdote. “Moses.”

He looked around with his eyes, not moving his head. “Here I am.” He was hoping desperately that there would be no reply.

Then the voice, “Come no closer.” Moses didn’t need any convincing there.

“Take off your shoes Moses, for where you are standing is sacred.”

Moses bent down and took his shoes off slowly. How did this person know his name? What does the voice mean by sacred? What if it is a robber who wants to make it difficult for me to get away over those sharp rocks? What if it isn’t? A million of these questions ran through his mind as he went through the motions of loosening the straps on his shoes.

And then the voice: “I am God.”

And Moses felt ill. What is it like to be so close to the presence of God? What is it like to feel God, hear him audibly, sense him being right over there, to hear him say your name?

God, creator of all, enormous power, a voice that trivialises the mountain that Moses stood on. A holiness that demands respect, awe and reverence. And yet an intimacy that knows your name. God, transcendent and distant, yet immanent and close. God an paradox of a deity, came down to Moses’ level and from a bush that didn’t burn, a simple anomaly in the course of nature, God called his name.

Moses hid his face. We don’t know if this was because of this total immersion in holiness, we don’t know if the

brightness of God's glory showed up the frail inadequacies of who Moses liked to think he was. We don't know, if he was afraid that God would punish him for being a murderer, or for leaving his Israelites in slavery in Egypt when he may have had the power to do something about it. We don't know if he felt the extreme isolation from God that he had tried so hard to nurture to protect himself from needing faith. He was alone with a God whom he had rejected, and had never been so afraid in his life.

What did he do? One thing we know for sure is that he didn't start singing worship songs he hid his face in shame. He was afraid of looking at God because rumour had it that if you saw God's face you would lose your life. And this is the irony. He was afraid that this rumour might be confirmed even though until now it had just been an old wives' tale.

And God spoke to Moses again. "I am the God of your father, and your father's fathers. And I have had enough of the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and now I will do something about it. I'm going to rescue them and take them to a new land where there is an abundance of food for them. So go down to Pharaoh of Egypt and tell him to let my people go."

Moses was speechless.

He was a fugitive who was living in a land as far away from the scene of the crime as possible. He didn't really have what we would call an active faith, more like someone who was religious, he was nominal—after all, God did have to introduce himself. He had also left his countrymen to suffer while he lived a peaceful life with his wife and extended family.

Now God knowing all these things had then said to Moses, "Go to pharaoh and tell him to let my people go."

Which is like saying to an Iraqi soldier, "Go to George Bush and tell him to stop the war."

Moses quite rightly in many respects replied to God ,who had only just now become relevant to him, "yeah, um, I hear what you're saying, but um, yeah nah, I can't see how I could possibly be the right person for this assignment you know? I'm a nobody. Oooh, er, there seems a sheep in trouble, I'll just go and . . ."

God said to Moses, "Moses, I am not mistaken, you are the right person to do this, but you won't be alone. I will be

with you. And one day you will come back here and worship me.”

Moses thought about the empty promise that God was making here.

“I’m not sure that you are true to your words God. Why did you wait for four hundred years before you heard the cries of people in suffering? Why did you have to put your chosen people through that? Because you had it under control? How many people do you need to suffer to prove how much control you have? My mother said you would come through, but I’m thinking that this is too little too late.”

“Yeah Jesus, I really appreciate you saying that you would be with us to the end of the age. But frankly I can’t see how you’re doing this. I need something more than just the bible and some good feelings during church. I need to be able to see you at work in the world. I need to see you saving me from my own sin, you don’t seem to throw a life line very often.”

Moses continued, “But let’s get hypothetical here. Let’s say I do go down and don’t get killed in the process. And I’m standing there in front of all the Israelite elders, who remember me and what I did and how I ran away . . . and took away all their dreams of having an insider in the palace courts to ease their pain. But anyway, I’m standing there and I say God has sent me to save you. And they screw up their faces and say “Sorry, which God was that exactly? We didn’t think you knew God by the way you acted. What am I gonna say?”

And God said, “I am who I am. I am what I am. I will be what I will be.”

There was a pause where Moses felt like an idiot. Partly because he really didn’t understand what God was saying there. It was either ridiculous or deep, though he knew instinctively that it was the latter, because the answer did show to him was that this voice was the same voice that had spoken to his father, and his father’s fathers. This was the same God who the people of Israel, the Hebrews had prayed to for the last 400 years. So when God said “Tell the elders of Israel that ‘I am’ has sent you, Moses knew that this would be enough.

And God continued to speak to him.

“I want you to tell the elders that you want them to go with you to the pharaoh and tell him that your people seek three days leave from their work so that they can worship me in the desert. He won’t let you. But that’s fine, because I will force him to later. I want to put him in his place and also I want to show my people just how powerful their God is.

“When they leave, I tell you, the Egyptians will be so glad to see you all go that they will give you all sorts of things without hesitation. That’s right, you will end up plundering the Egyptians. Have faith.”

Moses protested, “what if they still don’t believe me?”

God gave him three miracles to perform. And they weren’t bad either, none of this “unequal legs becoming the same length” type of miracle. One was taking the wooden staff in his hand throw it on the ground it turns into a snake! Another was making his hand turn leprous and the healing it in an instant later. And God gave him a third as a backup plan too, if Moses took some water from the Nile river and poured it on the ground, they’d see it turn to blood. Those are all pretty amazing miracles.

I’m not sure whether God was providing proof for the elders or for Moses. Even after Moses had seen two of these miracles, one of which he felt his hand go numb as the nerves died from the leprosy, even though Moses had witnessed a piece of wood turn into a snake and then have to bend down and pick it up, even though all of this, and while the bush is still burning but not being consumed, Moses says to God,

“yeah, that’s cool, but I’m not that good at speaking eh. I don’t think well on my feet and . . .”

God said, “Moses, this is me you’re talking to, I am the architect of your vocal chords. Don’t you think the same power that healed your hand three minutes ago is able to heal your voice? Language problems? Don’t you remember what I did at Babel? Who’s in charge of language? I will give you the words and the skill to communicate.”

And Moses said, “Oh, come on, just send someone else.”

God gave him a spokesperson saying, “I’m not impressed Moses. I am God. Don’t forget that. But for your confidence, and until you gain faith, and more importantly

because I believe in you though you clearly don't believe in me, I will let you take your brother as a spokesperson."

Just send someone else. Moses' answer to the great commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew. Moses' answer as spoken by myself and many others when it comes to the crunch. We often feel called. But we often pray earnestly that God will just send someone else. Come on God, someone else can do it! And then, we go back to our little flocks of sheep and ignore the magnitude of the call that God places on us.

Why does God want us to participate in the redemption of this world? Why does he want us to be his hands? Why does he want us to be his mouthpiece to society? Because God believes in us and our abilities far more than we believe in the abilities of God. We are powerless because of our inability to accept that God is powerful, that God will perform miracles, that God will engage with this world. But we forget that when we pray for God to help in situations, he will 99 times out of 100 he will send a person.

We are the pool of people he will choose from, we are the ones who are meant to be willing to see the world change, to participate in the God given task of helping to save this world from itself and help it come to some kind of relationship with God. And just like Moses had aaron, we have the power of the holy spirit! If God is for us, who can be against us?

And yet, here we are, and I know what it's like to be afraid. I know what it's like to arrive at work or at school and not have faith or even hope that God will be our inspiration and give us the words to say. And often it's because I have been too afraid just in case the whole thing turns pear shaped and I am the one who looks bad.

And I am guilty of praying that someone else will be sent.

Remember Isaiah when he was called, that when God said "Who will I send? Who will go?" And Isaiah though totally in awe says "Here am I, send me." No proof, no miracles, just a dream and faith in God's power.

Moses did go, but I sense he missed out on a big part of participating in the plans that God unfolded for his people.

We are only as effective as we are willing. And if this world looks like it's getting worse, then one thing is for sure, it's certainly not God's fault.

This is the prayer of confession.