

Moses – a most unlikely minister

✠ Called by boundless mercy (vv.1-9)

✠ Powered by present grace (vv.10-15)

In the Name of the LORD, the great I AM, dear fellow heirs of the promise:

At the graduation of our congregation's son Matthew Zeng from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary two weeks ago Seminary President Earl Treptow told the story of a Call meeting he once attended. He shared with the congregation details about each of the pastors on the Call list he had assembled. Then one of the members asked a question Treptow wasn't sure how to answer. "Yes, we hear all the details, but just tell us, who's the rock star?" It was rather comical how Treptow described his mind racing to a "rock star" smashing guitars and dancing around the stage. Realizing that probably wasn't the question, he asked, "What do you mean by *rock star*?" "Young, excellent preacher, great organizer, engaging youth pastor, excellent administrator who can lead our congregation to new heights" – something like that. So President Treptow went back through the list of candidates, then said, "Each of these pastors has exceptional gifts that would be a great match for the needs of this congregation. But I have to tell you, the Apostle Paul isn't with us anymore. If he were, he'd be telling you he's just *"a jar of clay."* The rest of the graduation sermon reviewed the fact that every **minister** is just "a jar of clay" with the treasure of the Gospel inside. Shocking but true, **a most unlikely minister** was **Moses**. God's mysterious ways!

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If you were putting together a Call list for God, would you choose a murderer fugitive from justice? How about a flaming persecutor who savaged Christian men, women and children to their death in prison? Would you choose a swindler who used legal means to extort money from defenseless citizens? Each **unlikely minister** in today's readings was **Called by boundless mercy**. Matthew the tax collector had the backing of Roman soldiers to force fellow Jews to pay as much in taxes as he wanted. And what about Saul, that up and coming, highly religious Pharisee? Saul traveled to foreign cities in his obsession to round up Christians and stamp out what he considered an imposter's religion. 1500 years earlier, we have these verses from Exodus 15, **Moses – a most unlikely minister**. Why does God do this?

Maybe you remember from Sunday school how Moses ended up in Midian and how long he'd been out there in the desert. This is the same Moses who was drawn out of the river by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as an Egyptian prince. But Moses sided with his own slave nation of Israel and murdered an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave. He barely escaped with his life. That was forty years ago, and now Moses is about eighty...on the run with no desire to go back to Egypt.

Why would God choose such an **unlikely minister**? And look at what a spectacular meeting took place out there. **The Angel of the LORD** in the Old Testament is the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, the only begotten Son of God centuries before He was born of the virgin Mary as Jesus of Nazareth. Miraculously, **the Angel of the LORD** appeared in blazing fire inside a bush on the mountainside. Moses had to go over and see why the bush was not burning up from that blaze.

Would he have been so curious if he realized **our God is a consuming fire**? (Hebrews 12:9) God threatens eternal torment in hell for all murderers: **"But those who are cowardly, unbelieving, detestable, murderers, adulterers, sorcerers, idolaters, and all the liars will have their share in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."** (Revelation 21:8 EHV) Reason to run, wouldn't you say? Honestly, who of us could come to church for confession if that's all they knew about God?

God is so holy and separate from sinners that He told Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. This is the God who says, *“Be holy, because I the LORD your God, am holy.”* (Leviticus 19:2) And in case anyone wonders what that means, Jesus tightens up the definition in His *Sermon on the Mount*: *“Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (Matthew 5:48) That not, *become perfect*, as if you might have more lifetimes to keep trying, but *“Be perfect.”* *“Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”* (Hebrews 12:14 NIV) No wonder Moses hid his face in fear of seeing God.

Moses’ plans needed God’s timing. Forty years after he struck out on his own, now *the Angel of the LORD* is calling Moses to lead that nation of slaves to the *good and spacious land* of Canaan. After cruel bondage in Egypt, the LORD God had prepared *a land flowing with milk and honey* – bees buzzing and animals breeding. There they could enjoy God’s rich bounty in the Promised Land.

Who can miss the miracle of **boundless mercy**? The LORD comes calling for Moses, as He would someday reach out to Matthew to come follow Him. Then He’d put Saul in the pinchers of mercy to repent and become Paul the great missionary to us Gentiles. If you’re sure you’re not “a rock star,” then you’re in good company with all three **unlikely ministers** in today’s readings. But if you do think you are “a rock star,” you end up running the other way like Jonah. **Unlikely ministers** all need to be...

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Moses would not just be up against the most powerful ruler in the world at the time, the Egyptian Pharaoh. This **most unlikely minister** had an enemy deep inside who could crack his plaster as quick as a jar of clay. In an earthly sense Moses is asking a good question: *“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”* Is Moses admitting that he’s a murdering fugitive from justice? He doesn’t say so. In fact, he’ll go on in the verses after our text to make every excuse for why the LORD should send someone else. He’s suffering from false humility, in his comfort zone out there in the desert. Moses was actually a highly trained Egyptian prince far removed from God’s deliverance. But **boundless mercy** was burning in that bush to provide what Moses really needed. Not self-love or even self-confidence, **Unlikely ministers** need to be **Powered by present grace**.

That **grace** comes with power from the great **I AM**. Moses needed the LORD’s full and free forgiveness by faith in the coming Christ to wash away all sins, including murder. There was and is no other God with this Name. Pharaoh claimed to be a god, controlling the Nile River, beating down his enemies. But the Pharaoh deity was powered by sand that soon would bury his images. Moses was being sent by the LORD whose name in Hebrew יהוה (Yahweh) can be translated literally, *the One who Is*. The One God who actually exists, who created the world in six days by the power of His Word, was about to unleash that Word against Pharaoh and his superpower army of the ancient world. The LORD God would teach Pharaoh a lesson about his idols, baby helpless against the invincible power of almighty God.

This was pure **grace** for a **most unlikely minister**, and Moses would need to be **Powered by present grace** the rest of his life, which turned out to be forty years in the wilderness to the Promised Land. **Unlikely ministers** still need **empowering grace** from Jesus, the Lord of the Church, commanding us to *“disciple all the ethnic groups by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and by teaching them to guard and treasure all things, as many as I have commanded. Surely I am with you all the days to the gathered goal of the age.”* (Matthew 28:19f TPA)

God’s empowering **grace** comes packaged in *tentatio*, Latin for *trouble* and *hardship*. God knows we humans can only see by contrast. Confessing with Paul, “I am the worst of sinners,” the Lord’s **present grace** brings powerful joy. Then I see why our Lord treasures His Gospel in *jars of clay*. Ancient Jews besieged in Jerusalem hid their treasures in clay jars from Roman soldiers. But God does this to reveal the real *Rock Star* for us. *“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”* Then we can serve shoulder-to-shoulder with our unlikely ministers, **Called by boundless mercy, Powered by present grace**. Praise the great I AM! Amen.