



SUNDAY SERMON

Dear Moses: A Call to Shared Responsibility

Loving God, God of the prophets: open our hearts and minds and bless us with your word this morning. Amen.

A letter to Moses, revolutionary leader of the Israelite people. Somewhere in the Sinai desert.

“Dear Moses, I hear you are having a hard time getting all the Israelite people across the Sinai peninsula into the promised land. Of course, road trips are often trying, and it usually makes things worse when the promised destination sounds so amazing compared to the reality of 12 hour days on the back of a camel and nothing to eat but manna.

I can relate to sometimes feeling like the burden of the people you’re in charge of is just too much. I used to be the youth minister at St. Columba’s in Washington DC, and let me tell you I know what it’s like to have many hungry people questioning your judgement when you stop for lunch on the way to SCAP and everyone has to wait in line at the Wendy’s. It’s not exactly fast service there. Here’s a hint: when possible, try to schedule your route around stops at Chipotle. Everyone likes Chipotle and it doesn’t really bother them if it takes longer.

It is challenging when people get to the point of making very specific demands for the shopping list. Cucumbers, melons, and leeks were not generally called for during SCAP week, but I could never seem to keep enough bananas around to satisfy everyone. Sometimes I had to go to 2 different grocery stores in one day just to find enough.

I do want to say that your reaction seems a little over the top, however. While I certainly agree that you can’t carry all the people on your own — nobody can! — throwing up your hands and asking God to “kill me now!” is probably not helpful in the long run. At the very least, make sure to save sentiments like that for your private time, maybe while driving by yourself to the grocery store to pick up the garlic you forgot to buy on the first two trips.

In conclusion, no matter how bad things get, remember that the people are ultimately God’s people, not your people. God baked that manna and if these people have the audacity to whine about it, that’s really their problem, not yours. And also — I think you did the right thing in the end, recruiting some additional leaders to help you out. It’s going to take a village to get everybody across the desert and into the promised land. Sincerely, Jason.”

continued

DATE
Pentecost 19
Sunday, Sept. 30, 2018

PREACHER
The Rev. Jason Cox

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba’s is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

4201 Albemarle Street NW ■ Washington, DC 20016 ■ 202-363-4119 ■ Columba.org

So — it turns out there are some interesting parallels between being the revolutionary liberator of the Israelites and being the St. Columba's youth minister. In fact, I think most leaders — in a religious context or not — can relate to Moses' plight that we heard about this morning in the book of Numbers. It's lonely at the top. You can't make everybody happy all the time. Even when you're trying for the best outcome for the greatest number of people, someone is bound to end up with less than what they hoped for.

And then the grumbling starts, and the questions about how the decisions got made, and it's no wonder Moses wanted to throw up his hands and walk away. If the success of an organization depends on one person doing it all, then you can only do what that one person can do. You better hope that person doesn't break under pressure, or everything is going to fall apart.

But there is another way for an organization to be successful, and Moses hits on it by the end of the story. Now in my letter to Moses I was maybe not entirely fair to the young people and adult leaders who I took on SCAP over the years. By the way, SCAP, if you're new around here, stands for St. Columba's Appalachia Project, a summer mission trip to West Virginia that we've been going on for, I think, 30 years next June. While it's true that there was sometimes whining about where we would stop for lunch — and I did, in fact, have trouble finding enough bananas to keep our crew happy — for the most part, the reason that SCAP worked is because *everyone* pitched in, and did their part, without having to be reminded or asked or monitored.

Adults and youth alike shared responsibility for the wellbeing of the whole, and *because* everyone pitched in, there were remarkably few moments when I felt alone the way Moses clearly feels at the beginning of this story.

This past June Ledlie took the staff on a retreat to Claggett Center in Poolesville, Maryland. It was a good time to review the previous program year and plan ahead for this year. We did an exercise where we named things at St. Columba's that were going well, and tried to think about what it was, in those programs and activities, that made them work.

I named SCAP as something that seemed to work well year after year, and when I tried to think of why SCAP worked so well, what I came up with was that SCAP works because of the SCAP culture.

SCAP has a very particular culture: SCAP history and legends, SCAP stories passed on from year to year, SCAP traditions to be learned and treasured and taught to the next generation. The way the opening night campfire proceeds. The Tuesday night Nestorville potluck. The final blessing for seniors at the rock, right before we load the vans to head home.

And embedded in this culture is the SCAP standard of expected behavior. Everyone pitches in. Everyone works until all the work is done and whining is kept to a minimum. Everyone is accepted as they are. Everyone is valued and valuable. The best way I can describe it is a culture of shared responsibility.

Friends, I think that God is calling St. Columba's to a culture of shared responsibility. Whatever it is we want to do as a community, the only way we're going to be successful is if we all pitch in — if we do it together. We can do exponentially more working together than any of us could do on our own.

And like the Israelites trying to cross the Sinai desert, we're not going to make it with just one leader. We need many leaders in this congregation, many prophets who carry the story of this community in their hearts, and who are willing to organize and inspire and care for their

particular corner of God's Kingdom. Believe me, those of us up here wearing the collars are grateful for all the ways many leaders in this community— worship leaders and prayer leaders, outreach leaders and formation leaders and so on— make it possible for all of us to keep moving forward together.

Those of you who are in leadership already — I want to ask you to think about what a culture of shared responsibility means in your particular ministry. One thing I'd like for all of us to learn from SCAP is how important it is to welcome in the next generation, to take time to teach newcomers the stories and the ways that have come before. And to be willing to learn from and listen to them as well.

And for those of you who are new, who are standing on the edge and wondering if this community is for you, I want to invite you to jump in. Get your feet wet. If you're wondering where you might fit into the larger system here at St. Cs, reach out to Jennifer Turner, our minister for member engagement. She would be delighted to talk with you and connect you with others in this community who share your passions and interests — who want to work with you to expand the reach of God's love into the world around us.

And for everyone, new and old, I want to invite us to think about what it means to share the responsibility of St. Columba's budget. We're in the midst of our annual pledge campaign now, and it is your responsibility, and your privilege, to take stock of God's blessings in your life, and determine what portion of that you are able to give back for the work of this place. I firmly believe that if everyone contributes, it won't be hard to meet our budget for next year. Our witness to the way of love depends on your contribution, in every sense of that word.

And what God can do with this contribution — the love we can build here and share with the world around us — is simply beyond our imagination. The promised land is in sight. God's kingdom is at hand. Let's get going. Amen.