

Fixed, Kept, and Tattooed

Our last encounter with Moses found him in the desert staring down the burning bush as God called him to notice the Hebrews' suffering as God had and to go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and work for the people's freedom. The rest of Exodus recounts the dramatic stand-off between God and Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites' years of wandering and occasionally whining in the wilderness, manna from heaven, and God's giving of the Law, the Ten Commandments. Now we come to Deuteronomy where Moses gives his farewell address, not to the Hebrews who left Egypt but to their children and grandchildren. He wants to make it clear that the promises made with God in the wilderness are *their* promises, too. Before he recites the Ten Commandments for them again, he tells them, "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today."¹ Moses wants the people to understand as they begin a new chapter in a new land that the God who brought them out of Egypt, the God who saved their ancestors is their God, their savior, too. [Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9]

In high school I adopted a habit that puzzled my dad. In order to remember things I would write notes on the back of my hand. It wasn't unusual for me to come home with cryptic words in varying colors about homework or a student council project or even a friend's phone number (landline, of course) scribbled on my hand. I'm sure my mother had opinions about this habit, but it was my father who was always shaking his head. He asked why I didn't write on my palm, where it would at least be a bit more hidden. But I explained that it would wash off or wear off too easily, thus failing at what I needed it to do—help me remember.

Moses seems concerned that the Israelites will forget too, that they will forget all that has come before as well as the One has brought them to this moment. God is perhaps a bit concerned, too. It has been forty years after all. The people who are peering into the Promised Land are not the ones who fled Pharaoh's armies. They have heard the stories about the slavery their grandmothers and grandfathers left behind. And now a new world lies ahead, a land of milk and honey, a new place where these wandering ones can stop wandering, a place they

¹ Deuteronomy 5:2-3, New Revised Standard Version

can call home. It can be hard to remember old words and ancient promises you did not hear with your own ears, especially when so much good new shiny opportunity lies ahead, which is why Moses gives such concrete directions about how to be mindful, how to remember.

Every once in a while I come across one of those silly quizzes that says it can tell which generation I belong to just by answering a few questions. Inevitably, the quiz will ask, “Do you have a tattoo?” The answer is, “No.” If some scribbles on the back of my hand threw my father for a loop, I cannot begin to imagine how he would feel about a tattoo. But I have thought about it, and not just as a way to commemorate that big birthday last year. I have good friends who have them, and I know some of you do, too. The artwork is fascinating, but it is the stories behind them that I find most compelling. In almost every case my friends want to remember something in a real and lasting way. One friend has an elaborate dragonfly that covers her shoulder. It is a sign of beauty and new beginnings. Another has the Hebrew word *hesed* on her ankle. It is the word for faithful loving kindness, especially the stubborn love God shows us no matter what. She got it after losing a child and going through a painful divorce. She decided to put it where she could see it, where she could not NOT see it, because in those dark days she was tempted to forget. I know one young mom who has a tattoo that reminds her of her beloved grandfather who died just a year ago. They shared a birthday, and she still misses him terribly. The artwork inscribed on her body is a tangible way to hold him close, to remind her that the special loving bond they shared is still real and true and good.

I recognize that the drive to get a tattoo is foreign to many of us. It is not something older generations made a regular practice of. In fact in some circles tattoos are frowned upon as something shameful or wrong. But I am beginning to appreciate them in a different way, because I am beginning to understand that we need help holding on to the good things, the fleeting things like hope, love, beauty and courage, especially in a world that changes so quickly, when lives are so mobile, and community is so easily frayed and fractured. It can be hard to recall who we are and whose we are without a little help.

I have mentioned Father Greg Boyle before. He is a Roman Catholic priest who works alongside former gang members in California. He recalls a time when he says he had been too critical, too harsh with a man named Sharkey. After growing frustrated with Sharkey, he says:

I decided to catch him in the act of doing the right thing...[He knows Sharkey is] trying the best he can.

I tell him how heroic he is and how the courage he now exhibits far surpasses the 'bravery' of his barrio past. I tell him he is a giant among men. I mean it. Sharkey seems to be thrown off balance by all this and silently stares at me. Then he says, "[Dang], G...I'm gonna tattoo that on my heart."²

I'm fairly certain that Sharkey is already covered in tattoos, marks of his former life where he proclaimed to any who saw him that he was one to be feared, or at least not messed with. But now he wants to be marked in a different way. He wants to remember deep down that he has been transformed and claimed by One who can be trusted to love him and save him from all that would lead him anywhere but the path of life and wholeness, goodness and salvation.

It is almost as if Moses is catching the Hebrew people doing the right thing after years of frustration and struggle. He grabs the people's attention, verbally holding their faces in his hands:

Listen to me and hang on to these words, not for my sake but for yours. This God who brought you to this point is the only God who can be trusted to love you and save you, the only God who can be counted on to lead you in the path of life and wholeness, goodness and salvation. You are about to be inundated by other options, other gods who will promise all the shiny things but cannot deliver what you truly need. Hang on to this God, because this God is the only one who can be trusted to hang on to you.

Moses uses language of keeping, binding, holding, fixing, words that too me sound like a tattoo, a tattoo on the heart even, a permanent reminder that will not wear off or wash off no matter what. The world is changing and other gods will vie for their loyalty and attention, other things, other voices will want to make a claim on them. Moses knows he will not be with them to remind them, and he is desperate that they not forget all that has happened, all that has come before, all that God has done for them, even when they and their ancestors before them tried to go another way. He frantically wants them not to forget the God who has brought them this far. And so they are to put these words about loving God with everything they have and are, about the God of Israel being the one true God on their doorposts and on their foreheads. It is less about showing the world who they are and more about reminding themselves whose they are. He knows they will be tempted to forget, because he

² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free, 2010) xiv.

knows that their ancestors were quick to forget. Even when they had witnessed the plagues, even though they had walked through the sea on dry land, even though they had been fed manna from heaven, even though they had drunk water that sprang from a rock, the freed Hebrews managed to forget the God who had saved them. They were fickle and feckless, trading the glitter of a golden calf for the promise of a God who had turned Pharaoh's heart to stone for them.

And the truth is they will forget again, just as we do. And I suspect Moses knows this, too, which is why he wants them to fix this reminder everywhere they are bound to look. When they lose their way, when other gods, other voices want to parcel out their hearts bit by bit, he hopes they will stop for a minute and recall the One who brought them out of bondage, the One who saved them once, the One who will keep saving them, the One who keeps saving us:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.³

I have daydreamed about what my tattoo might look like if I ever got one, but I'm not sure I'll ever follow through. But maybe it is not about my picking a design or just the right phrase. Maybe it's not even about finding the right spot on my wrist or my ankle. God knows that the tattoo I need should go right here, in and on my heart. *The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* Our God is not found in the whims of the world, or in the voices of those who want something from us, or in the powers who want to tell us or anyone else that they are anything less than a beloved child of God. God wants that message fixed in the people's hearts, tattooed on them, on us. When we lose our way, when we allow the larger world to tell us who we are or to tempt us with easy promises, maybe we will see the words fixed on our doorposts and tattooed on our hearts, and maybe—by the grace of God, we will return our hearts and our very selves back to God who is always there, always waiting. Because you see, it is this God who meets us in every doorway, this God who keeps our coming in and our going out, this God who frees us from bondage, this God who has us fixed in his heart. It is this God who gives his only Son, his very heart to us and for us that we might live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NRSV