

The Loneliness of Leadership

Ruth Haley Barton

Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me...If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here."

Exodus 33:12, 14

Any leader who cannot endure profound levels of loneliness will not last long. In his book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Dr. Edwin Friedman identifies five universal and essential characteristics of those who are leading toward something that is genuinely new. One of those characteristics is a willingness to be exposed and vulnerable relative to our fear of being alone. He says, "One of the major limitations of imagination's fruits is the fear of standing out. It is more than the fear of criticism. It is anxiety at being alone, of being in a position where one can rely little on others, a position that puts one's resources to the test, a position where one will have to take total responsibility for one's own response. Leaders must not only *not* be afraid of that position; they must come to love it."¹

This kind of loneliness—being in a position where we must take total responsibility for ourselves and for what God is calling us to do no matter what others are doing—is an absolute truth of leadership. None of us escapes it. There is a unique burden that comes from knowing that the buck stops here—that there is something that has been given by God for you to do and that to renege would be akin to Jonah hiding out in the bottom of the boat trying to pretend that he had not received a call from God. You can do it, but it won't leave you with much of a life!

On some days the magnitude of the responsibility and the awareness of our aloneness can be crushing. But there is a point in the leadership journey where we have gotten so far away from Egypt that we could not go back even if we wanted to. We have seen enough of the dream that to

go back would make us crazier than continuing to move forward. And even if we did go back—we probably would not get a very warm welcome!

Lonely for God

Persevering through the loneliest experiences of leadership requires inner stamina that is more than mere stubbornness. It is the ability to stay grounded in God, to stay true to one's path, to continue—even in the face of grave opposition—to move towards the vision that we have been privileged to see. But there is an even deeper kind of loneliness which every leader must grapple with. It is the kind that Moses experienced in Exodus 33 when he felt abandoned by God himself in the midst of one of the most difficult moments of the entire Exodus journey.

You remember the story...Moses had been on Mount Horeb waiting for a word from the Lord and it took longer than anyone expected. When he finally descended from the mountain carrying stone tablets on which God himself had written the Ten Commandments, it should have been a moment of great celebration. Instead, he returned to camp only to find that the people's tolerance for waiting had run out and they had turned to other gods. Even worse, Aaron, his brother and right hand man, had allowed the people to coerce him into this betrayal.

It is not hard to imagine the devastation that Moses must have experienced as he surveyed the situation. It must have taken every ounce of his strength to lead through the events of the next few days as he literally stood between an angry God and a wayward people and tried to make atonement for their sins. Willing to sacrifice his own life if it would do anything to improve the situation, he put himself on the line and said, *"If you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book you have written."*

God did spare the people from being destroyed by his righteous anger, but the whole interaction took a tremendous amount of spiritual stamina on Moses' part. When it was all over, he was wiped out. Not only were the people impossible to deal with, but God had also informed Moses that he was so angry that he was not going to be among them as they entered into the Promised

Land. *“I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”*

There is loneliness and then there is *loneliness*. What Moses encountered here was the deepest kind of loneliness—the loneliness of feeling abandoned by God. This was the emptiness of losing the one thing that mattered most, the one thing that gave the journey its very meaning. Moses was sure that he couldn’t go on without *that* and so he just stopped. He refused to accept that God wanted to bail on the Israelite mission or supervise it from a distance and he took it up with God directly as he always did.

He said, *“See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people;’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”*

And God responded, *“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”*

But Moses was not completely convinced. He wanted to make sure that God knew that he had reached a limit. *“If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. How else will the people know that we have found favor in your sight unless you go with us? In this way we shall be distinct.”*

Moses needed more than just wordy assurances. He was desperate for a sign of God’s favor—some assurance that he was not ultimately alone—and so he asked God to show him his glory. Who wouldn’t want to see God’s glory, after all? But God knew that what Moses really needed was the assurance of God’s goodness. Moses was well acquainted with God’s justice, his power, and his righteousness and he had seen more than enough of God’s anger and punishment. What he needed now was an experience God’s goodness, his graciousness and his mercy. Moses was lonely for the loving presence of God.

A Pivotal Moment in the Leader's Journey

The moment we realize that the presence of God is more important to us than any Promised Land we could ever envision is a pivotal one in the life of a leader. This is the moment when whatever the Promised Land is for us—a church of a certain size, a new ministry, a new building, writing a book, being sought out as an expert on this, that or the other thing—pales in significance when compared with our desire for God. At this point, we might realize it's been a long time since we ourselves have had a consistent inner experience of the presence of God. Leadership has taken a toll. We look around at what we have accomplished and wonder if we have gotten where we are merely through our own human effort or if we have gotten out ahead of the very Presence that called us to this journey in the first place. We see that our own relationship with God has been overtaken by ministry concerns and we are ambushed by a crushing awareness that we have lost a sense of God's presence deep within.

A great emptiness has opened up and we realize, as Moses did, that there is no Promised Land we could ever envision that matters nearly as much as the presence of God in our lives right here and right now. Future possibilities are not enough, because by now we're not even sure we will be around to see them. It's not even enough to know others are experiencing the goodness of God *through* us; there has to be some goodness in it *for* us, something to sustain our own fragile souls.

To grapple with our loneliness in God's presence brings us face to face with an existential disquiet rooted in the reality that we will never be fully satisfied by anything that is of this earth. We have tried (perhaps without even knowing it) to distract ourselves from this disquiet with many things—including our busyness in ministry. We have endured much. We have spent years running here, there and everywhere trying to prove ourselves. We have sacrificed, stretched, worked hard, and maybe even achieved something of substance and significance. But it does not satisfy this loneliness of soul. Now we realize that there is not one more accomplishment or achievement or title or degree after our name that will satisfy it—and the only reason we know that is because we

have tried it all. Something *is* missing and that “something missing” is the experience of the presence of God that drew us into ministry in the first place.

Strengthened in the Inward Being

Have you faced a moment like this in your own life—a moment when you knew you could not continue to face the challenges of leadership without some experience of God’s goodness in the depths of your own life? A moment when you realized all past successes, past achievements, past experiences of God are not enough to sustain you now? Have you ever experienced loneliness and disillusionment so deep that nothing out there in the future—no carrot dangling on the end of a stick—could make the sacrifice seem worth it? Are you there right now?

If your answer is yes, thank God for it because this may be the moment of your greatest freedom—your freedom from being so driven by visions of some future possibility that you are distracted from seeking God in the here and now. Thank God for it because this is the moment when you *know* down to the bottom of your being that the nearness of God is your ultimate good and you are not willing to sacrifice that for anything—including any Promised Land you have envisioned. Thank God for it because the goodness of the Lord—which fills all emptiness—is about to pass before you.

As painful as it is, recognizing this kind of aloneness for what it is prevents us from being seduced into believing our restlessness can be satiated “out there” in the realm of activity, success, notoriety and social connection. This in itself is no small thing. Allowing ourselves to face our ultimate aloneness compels us to “travel *inward*” as Moses did, “to meet ourselves and to meet the infinite love and riches of God dwelling inside our beings.”² Then our aloneness is transformed into an inner fullness in which God’s presence fills all emptiness.

Practice

Take some time to be with God as honestly as Moses was regarding the unique burdens of your situation and the loneliness of your own leadership experience. Is there any way in which your own personal experience of the presence of God has slipped? Are you at a point of doubting the goodness of God in your own ministry situation?

Resist the urge to rush to fix anything or problem-solve. That would be the worst thing you could do right now. Instead, open up your loneliness in God's presence and wait for him to meet you in that place. Do not seek community with others yet. Seek community and intimacy with God first and then wait to see how God meets you and who God brings.

*Blessed are you
who has given each man a shield of loneliness
so that he cannot forget you.*

*You are the truth of loneliness,
and only your name addresses it.*

*Strengthen my loneliness
that I may be healed in your name,
which is beyond all consolations
that are uttered on this earth.*

*Only in your name
can I stand in the rush of time,
only when this loneliness is yours
can I lift my sins toward your mercy.*

Leonard Cohen
*Book of Mercy*³

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¹ Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), p. 188.

² Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness* (New York: Random House/Doubleday, 2004), p. 194.

³ Leonard Cohen, *Book of Mercy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988), p. 9.