

Isn't It Aaronic?

^{NRS} **Numbers 6:22** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³ Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, ²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. ²⁷ So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

There are a lot of famous brothers out there.

The Grimm brothers shared Germany's fairy tales with the world. The Wright brothers flew the world's first airplane...incidentally they were also the first to experience a mechanical delay and probably lost some of their luggage lost along the way as well...two other noble airline traditions. The Marx brothers kept us laughing. The James brothers robbed our trains. The Kennedy brothers gave us the greatest tragic story America has ever known. Regardless of whether you agreed with their politics, no family should suffer the kind of loss they knew. The Allman brothers all but created the soundtrack of the 70's although for a variety of reasons those memories might be a little hazy for some of you. These days the Cohen brothers produce the world's quirkiest, regional films. The Mario brothers are still popping through giant drain pipes in the world of Nintendo- the most famous animated plumbers the world will probably ever see. And, as much as I wish I didn't know this, the Jonas brothers are at this very moment, the absolute delight of pre-teens around the world.

There are a ton of famous brothers out there. So many, that it's baffling to realize Moses and Aaron don't make the cut. I mean if I were to ask you all to list famous brothers- even if I were to ask you for a list of famous brothers from the Bible, Moses and Aaron just do not come to mind. In fact if you go the net and look up famous

brothers- if Moses is ever listed they pair him with Rameses who a) wasn't Moses' brother; and b) historians think Moses probably never even knew anyway.

No, when we think of Moses we think of a one man show. We think of Charlton Heston with a giant beard and a rifle...er...staff dividing the Red Sea all by his lonesome. When we think about the Exodus, it's the Moses show to us- NOT the Moses and Aaron show.

And for the life of me I don't get this. Because not only was Aaron Moses' brother, his older brother by three years. But Aaron was instrumental in forming the people of Israel. In fact I'd go so far to say that if we don't understand Aaron and the role he played, we are never going to really understand the Old Testament.

So what was the big deal about Aaron? Well, he's not just Moses' big brother, he was probably the most well known of the brothers during the Exodus. If you were an Israelite during the time of the Exodus, you might have known Moses, but you DEFINITELY knew Aaron. Why? Because Aaron does all the talking.

If you remember back to Exodus and God calling Moses through that burning bush, Moses throws out reason after reason why God should find someone, anyone ELSE to go to Egypt and face down Pharaoh. The last reason he gives is that he doesn't speak well, that he has some kind of speech impediment. And God, finally losing patience with Moses, says, "Fine, I'm sending Aaron your brother to you. He doesn't have a problem talking. He will be your mouth." And this is why if you actually read Exodus it can sound a lot like a childish junior high situation with God telling Moses to tell Aaron something to tell the rest of us. You know, it's like we're not on speaking terms. I've

always thought it would be funny if the people after hearing something said, “Oh yeah Aaron? Well why don’t you go tell Moses, to tell God if he wants to talk to us he knows how to find us.” And of course it was probably a very good idea they didn’t do that, but it’s just what all this intercession makes me think. So the entire idea behind the movie the 10 Commandments with Moses being this heroic guy and giving these long impressive speeches- it’s completely false. It does make for a better movie, I grant you, but it’s completely false. No Moses was more Cyrano De Bergerac than Charlton Heston.

And Aaron didn’t simply speak for Moses- he did some incredible things as well. It was Aaron who competed with the Pharaoh’s magicians, not Moses. When Pharaoh commanded his magicians to transform their staffs into snakes, Aaron threw his down and the ground and commanded it to turn into this enormous snake that swallowed up all the others.

It’s Aaron who kicks off the whole series of plagues against Egypt, holding out his staff and turning the rivers and canals into blood.

It’s Aaron who causes the frogs to rain down from the sky.

It’s Aaron who creates a swarm out of gnats out of the clouds of dust.

It’s never just Moses all by himself. It’s always Moses and Aaron.

But it’s not how we remember the story, is it, though? No, most of us just completely paint Aaron out of the picture.

And the reason we do this? Well, I think Moses just fits better with the way we think about the Old Testament than Aaron does. Moses fits our idea of the Old Testament and Aaron...well he just doesn't.

When it comes to the Bible most of us have been taught a kind of good cop; bad cop way of reading the thing. We've been taught to think of the Old Testament as the bad cop- we think of it as a book with a long beard and a furrowed brow, a book where God is angry most of the time.

Whereas the New Testament we think of as being the good cop- the nice cop. The one who smiles at you and gets you a cup of coffee and tells you everything is OK. We think of Jesus as this really sweet guy who just wants to care for us and listen to all our problems.

In fact this teaching is so successful I've even heard people, church people, thinking that the Old Testament is so different than the New Testament that really it's like God is different; that there's like an Old Testament God and a New Testament God.

Now in our defense this isn't entirely our fault. This kind of thinking has been going on for centuries. In the second century when the church was still in diapers there was an incredible influential guy named Marcian. And Marcian is the first person on record to talk like this, and he said there really were two gods. There was an Old Testament god who created the world and really wasn't very good, and then there was the New Testament God who saved the world and was really much better. And in the attempt to simplify everything he said instead of having all these awful books in the Bible- the church should just get rid of the Old Testament. And really, to make things even more clear, we should get rid of most of the books in the New Testament, too. And

so if Marcian would have had his way, we just would have had the Gospel of Luke and a few of the letters of Paul.

Now the church rightly saw Marcian for what he was- an Anti-Semite as well as a phenomenally bad reader. Because of course the Old Testament isn't just law- it's also full of grace and incredible love. And New Testament isn't just all sugar and spice. But unfortunately, even though Marcian didn't get his way- his views live on. Really, I'd say most of us have a kind of innate Marcianism to us- seeing the Old Testament as mainly being about law and the New Testament being about grace.

And because of this- well it's no wonder we have a hard time seeing Aaron, because while Moses certainly is about the law, heck he's the one who literally lays down the law, Aaron's role as the high priest is always conveying God's grace and love. If Moses is kind of the Simon Cowell in the Old Testament, always kind of speaking the truth in anger. Aaron is more the Paula Abdul, he's the one always trying to encourage the people and to remind them God is a God of love as well as law.

Part of this is just his role as high priest. See, as priest Aaron's entire job is to intercede with God on behalf of the people- and then to bring a sense of God's forgiveness through sacrifice. And sometimes he even gets involved at a personal level.

In Numbers 12 we hear a painful story of sibling rivalry. Because of his special relationship with God Moses had grown incredibly powerful. And sometimes the powerful do things not because they are right, but just because they can. And we hear in Numbers 12 that Moses marries a Cushite woman, something he's said the rest of Israel may not do. And Miriam and Aaron seeing this, seeing their younger brother establish

one law for everyone else and another for himself, they grumble about this. Especially Miriam. They say doesn't God speak through us just as much as him? And God, not happy about this, chastises them both, and strikes Miriam with leprosy. Now if Aaron was smart, he would have kept his mouth shut. He was in enough trouble as it was. But seeing his sister like that, he just can't keep quiet. He asks God to forgive her and to remove her punishment. And whenever I read that I'm always gritting my teeth waiting for God to send down a lightning bolt, but God doesn't. God hears Aarons' request and after 7 days heals Miriam.

And this isn't the only time Aaron's love for the people gets him into trouble. When Moses was up on top of that mountain for forty days and forty nights, speaking with God and receiving the law, Aaron was the one left down below with the people. Now imagine it. This huge throng of people are out in the absolute middle of nowhere. No maps. No GPS. No reliable source of food and water. And it isn't just men and women- they've got children with them. They've got their babies with him. And then the leader of this expedition, the one who can barely speak to them, he decides to go on a camping trip? He decides it's time to climb Mt. Sinai? And he does, he heads up the mountain leaving them down there now completely alone. If they were anxious to begin with, and wouldn't you be? That had to be terrifying.

I imagine the first few days weren't so bad. The mountain is just shy of 7,500 feet. It's an easy walk up. A healthy man ought to be able to make it up and down in day with no trouble. And maybe if he went up and stayed the night and then came back down the next day- that seems reasonable. But after three days when he didn't come back, they had to start wondering what was going on. Did he lose his way? Did he fall? Cell

reception being notoriously bad on Sinai, you know, they kept trying to get through but weren't having any luck.

No, Moses leaves them without a plan. No sense of where he was going or what they were supposed to do in the meantime, or what they were supposed to do if he didn't come back. And Aaron's left with the people who are becoming more and more uneasy with every passing day.

And, finally, you probably remember what happened. They come to Aaron and demand to know where Moses is. And the text says they gather around him- this, you should know, isn't just neutral language about where they were standing. Gathering around someone is code language for stoning. To gather around someone is to assume the stoning position. So they gather around him and tell him if he can't produce Moses, then he needs to give them the next best thing. So he has them bring them all their jewelry and melts it down and creates an idol for them, like giving a pacifier to an angry baby. And Aaron does his best to make this as right as possible- he says they'll have a feast dedicated to the Lord. But it isn't the Lord they care about- it's the golden calf. And I don't know how long the worship service was, but the text says after that they reveled throughout the night.

And of course it's right at that moment that Moses comes down. Isn't that always the way?

Now we're always so critical of Aaron in this story. Horrible man, we say. Good Moses was up there talking with God. And horrible Aaron was down there letting the people do any old thing. But this isn't how I hear it. This isn't how I hear it at all.

Couldn't Moses have checked in once during that 40 day trip to let them know what was going on?

And it's not like the Golden Calf was the first response from the people- like they were just waiting until Moses was gone and then wham, out comes the calf. No, they held fast for over a month before caving in.

I think Aaron was just doing his very best to keep the people together, doing whatever he had to. And yeah, the calf was a bad idea, a very bad idea. But it was born out of Aaron's love for his people, his wanting to keep them together and comfort them at a terribly anxious moment.

We see the most clear exposition of Aaron's love for the people in our text for this morning- in the blessing known as the Aaronic blessing. We say this every Sunday here as part of our birthday blessing.

Now I will admit to you that I did not completely get the birthday chicken at first. I had never seen anything quite like it before in any congregation- East coast or West. But it didn't take me long to understand the importance this moment is here- and I think a lot of it has to do with the Aaronic blessing. The first several times I did it, I didn't do it right. At first I just prayed- and I wasn't touching anybody at all. And then with some gentle encouragement I think I put my hand on people's shoulders. And then I was told, you know, we're used to the pastor putting his hand on our heads.

And honestly, this seemed a little forward to me- I mean I hardly knew you all at that point. But I did it- and I immediately understood why this is meaningful, especially

The LORD bless you and keep you;²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. **Amen.**