

“Hikikomori Moses”

Exodus 3:1-15



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As many of you know Tom and I have a daughter, Kristen, who is in her second year of teaching English in Tokyo, Japan. Following my first visit with her last spring I came across a book called *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Lost Its Own Generation*. This book gave me greater insight into the disturbing social trends afflicting Japan that I had heard about from our daughter.

Though once on the verge of eclipsing the United States as the world's dominant economic power, Japan failed to recover fully from its economic struggles of the early 1990's and today confronts an array of disturbing social trends. What is interesting is that these disturbing trends are mostly not economic in nature. Poverty like we know it in the United States does not exist in Japan. A strong social safety net protects Japan's poorest citizens and the acquisition of the world's best material goods is a still a primary activity for many Japanese people. Yet, Ja-

pan has the highest suicide rate of all industrialized countries and rising numbers of untreated cases of depression among its young adults. A large number of young women who are educated and earning good salaries are rejecting the traditional path to marriage and motherhood, and are choosing to spend their money on luxury goods and travel causing Japan to have one of the lowest birthrates of any country in the world.

Even more troubling are the more than one million intelligent, creative young men who have shut themselves in their rooms for months and even years, withdrawing completely from society. Known as hikikomori, this affliction went unnoticed for a number of years because of the shame this behavior brought to their families. Now out in the open researchers can find no other country where there is such a large movement of young, modern day hermits. The author of *Shutting Out the Sun* uses the condition of hikikomori to describe the condition of Japan as a whole—a country whose tradition-steeped society, aversion to change, and its distrust of the individual and the expression of self are stifling the economic revival, political reform, and social revolution and, yes, spiritual renewal so urgently needed. It is becoming a hikikomori nation.

This morning we are going to look at a man named Moses who like the hikikomori men of Japan was intelligent and creative, and after a specular career in the court of the ruler of Egypt succumbs to the pressure and flees to the desert to live a hikikomori existence. But before talking more about Moses I'd like to tell the story of another hikikomori, a fictional character named Hector Mann.

In his novel, *The Book of Illusion*, Paul Auster tells this story. Set in 1988 it is the tale of two men broken by the hard realities of life. One is the narrator, a college professor named David Zimmer, and the other is Hector Mann, a silent-film comedian who had disappeared without a trace in 1929 and who was considered long dead. Zimmer's life has been upended by the death of his wife and two sons in a plane crash. He spends his days in an alcoholic stupor, contemplating suicide, and essentially burying himself alive. One night he sees an old Hector Mann film on television, and it makes him laugh—for the first time since the death of his family. Mainly to keep himself going, Zimmer decides to research the films of Hector Mann, and ends up writing a book about them.

After his book is published Zimmer receives a letter from a woman claiming to be Mann's wife, stating that the actor is still

alive, has read Zimmer's book and would like to meet him. Zimmer flies out to their ranch in New Mexico and learns the story of Mann's disappearance. Back in 1929 Mann, who was a rising star in silent films, had been engaged to one woman while having an affair with another. When his fiancée accidentally shoots his lover, Mann feels responsible. To protect his fiancée, he buries the body of his lover, and then, taking a false identity, he leaves town. As atonement for his guilt, he vows never to work in the public eye again. He works at other jobs until he finally meets a woman who not only recognizes him, but also marries him.

They settle in New Mexico, with Mann taking her last name and remaining hidden. After life throws them another curve, she sees her husband sinking into despair, and so she proposes that he begin making movies again—something Mann is desperate to get back into. For years, he's been thinking of new movies, but because of his vow, he feels he cannot follow through on them. What they finally settle on, is that he will make the movies, but never show them to an audience, on the idea that if you make a movie and never show it, the movie doesn't exist.

So that is what they do. They build sets and editing rooms on their ranch, and with the help of a couple of close friends who are sworn to secrecy, Hector makes more than a dozen movies over the next several years. To keep his promise, however, he requests that upon his death, all copies of the movies are to be burned without anyone seeing them. Zimmer becomes a witness to all of this. He meets the old man, who dies soon after, and Zimmer sees Mann's wife burn the films. The last public knowledge of Mann is from that day in 1929 when he walked away from his life. In the end, Zimmer finds that what he has witnessed enables him to restart his own life, and he goes on, traveling in new directions and rejoining the living.

Mann's story parallels that of Moses. Raised by the Pharaoh's daughter, Moses too was a rising star. But then, like Mann, Moses found himself on the run following a death. Moses buried himself alive in Midian, shepherding for Jethro. This deliberate obscurity continued until the burning bush encounter with God, and that is where the similarities between Moses and Mann end, for Moses, albeit kicking and screaming, rejoins the living.

How many people, like Moses and Mann, have consciously chosen to retreat from the promise of their early years? There

are people who have looked at the talents God has given them and concluded, “No, it’s too risky to use them” or “I don’t deserve them” and who then move off the main stream to hunker down to live out their years in hikikomori anonymity. Now I don’t mean this as a “be all that you can be” sermon. The topic is not “live up to your potential.” In fact, you may recall an old Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown says to Lucy, “There is no heavier burden than a great potential.” No, Moses story should get us thinking not so much about fulfilling our potential as of choosing to live, to remaining engaged in the things that bring meaning and contribute to the overall welfare of our corner of the world. The Moses story points us to the possibility of engagement with life even after we encounter things that knock us down badly. Of course, there is a time for licking our wounds, but we can easily lose the rest of our days in that enterprise and that’s a real loss.

It is the encounter with the burning bush that is the big difference between Moses and Mann and the Japanese men. Moses and Mann already had two acts in their lives—the first a period of success and rising, the second a period of obscurity and hiding. But at the bush, God calls Moses to a third act, a period of engagement and working. Perhaps Herbert Mann could have been called to a third act as well. Sadly, he never reconsiders his withdrawal decision. He has buried his life, so Act II is the finale. With God’s help, though, Moses discovers that God has given him his life back to be used in ways that contribute to God’s purposes.

For us the choice is not simply shall we do God’s will or not, but do we choose to live or not to live? Do we choose involvement or disengagement, ongoing living or protracted suicide? There is no doubt that Moses understood the choice in stark terms like that. Years later, when he had finally gotten the people of Israel to the gateway of the promised land, he addressed them in what would be his final instructions. He says to them, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you.” Choose life! Choose to live! Moses of course, lived centuries ago, and Herbert Mann is a fictional character, but consider a contemporary of ours who had to make this choose-life decision.

Elie Wiesel was born in Transylvania in 1928 into close-knit community, but World War II changed his life forever. At age 15, he and his family were sent by the Nazis to Auschwitz,

where his mother and younger sister perished in the gas chambers. His father died at another concentration camp, and Wiesel himself ended up serving time at four different camps before he was liberated by the Allies. As an adult, he became a journalist, but his way of dealing with the horror he had lived through was to never speak of it. In fact, he vowed never to do so. While writing for one newspaper he met a man who encouraged him to break that vow. In making that decision, Wiesel had to relive the pain of his past, but he did so, realizing the story had to be told to deny the Nazis a posthumous victory and to protect the future of humanity from such evil reoccurring. In time, Wiesel wrote the novel *Night*, which related the experiences of Jews in the camps. He went on to write 40 additional works dealing primarily with Judaism, the Holocaust and the overall fight for justice among all peoples. In 1986 he won the Nobel Peace Prize and continues to work and speak for justice yet today.

Many believe that the hikikomori men of Japan are the result of a social problem. They are the products of a country resisting much needed social and political reform. Sometimes it is easier to withdraw and hide rather than face the changes that can bring new life. I think today Christians in our country are beginning to confront a hikikomori moment. For years now a small fraction of American households have been garnering a larger and larger concentration of wealth and income, while large corporations and financial institutions have obtained unprecedented power. Inequality in America is greater than it’s been in 50 years. Even the editors of the pro-business magazine *The Economist* have written that with “income inequality growing to levels not seen since the Gilded Age and social mobility falling behind, the United States risks calcifying into a European-style class-based society.” Yet in the face of this growing concentration of wealth and privilege in our country, and the increasing suffering of the poor, Christianity lost much of its voice, it became hikikomori, and was drowned out by the corporate, political, and religious right who hijacked Jesus. That’s right: They hijacked Jesus. The very Jesus who stood in Nazareth and proclaimed, “the Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor”—this Jesus, hijacked by a philosophy of greed. The very Jesus who fed 5000 hungry people, and not just those in the skyboxes; the very Jesus who offered kindness to the prostitute and hospitality to the outcast; who raised the status of women and treated even the

hated tax collector as a citizen of the Kingdom. The indignant Jesus who drove the money changes from the temple—this Jesus was hijacked and turned from a friend of the dispossessed into a guardian of privilege, the ally of oil barons, banking tycoon, media moguls and weapons builders.

But something is beginning to happen...there is a new wave of social reform that is beginning to break across America. Like almost every great social movement in the history of our country the flame of faith is at its core. In the last couple of years we are beginning to see a coalescence of the Christian community like I have never witnessed in my lifetime. Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants like Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans, and new evangelical churches are coming together around issues of economic justice, health care, environmental concerns, and peace. And their voice is beginning to be heard.

The Christian columnist Bill Moyers writes, “I believe the only way to be in the world is to see it as it really is and then to take it on despite the frightening things you see.” That was what Moses chose to do after his encounter with the burning bush, and that is the choice Elie Wiesel speaks of in his book, *Messengers of God*. He writes, “According to Jewish tradition, when God created humans, God gave them a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again. It is not given to humans to begin; that privilege is God’s alone. But it is given to humans to begin again, and so they do so, every time they choose to defy death and side with the living.”

It is always a temptation when wounded by life to get so focused on our personal problems that we don’t contribute to the larger communities of which we are a part. But Moses’ call is a challenge for any of us who are hankering for hikikomori, and who are tempted to drop out and let the world deal with its problems without our help. The message for us is to choose to live. Not to begin, but to begin again. May this be so for each of us to the glory of God.