



“Responding to God’s Call: Who Me?”
Scripture – Exodus 3: 11-4:-17
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 16, 2016

In this sermon series, we are studying the saga of Moses and what it reveals about the life of faith. To tackle the epic in its entirety would take months, so we are looking at six key episodes with an eye toward what they tell us about our own journey.

Last Sunday, we focused on the passage from the Book of Exodus in which Moses encountered God in the form of a burning bush. The bush serves as a metaphor of God’s burning desire for justice.

Moses detected God summoning him to return to Egypt to liberate his fellow Hebrews who were being used as slave labor for the Pharaoh.

The passage prompted us to contemplate the ways God calls each of us. Some are inspired to enter a particular profession and all of us are called by God numerous times to respond to the challenges and opportunities we encounter.

Today we listen to the manner in which Moses responded to God’s call and ask if it resembles the way we respond.

~~ Telling of the passage by Westminster By Heart Storytellers ~~

Can you remember a time when you faced a challenge and you doubted that you were up to it? It might be confronting a boss who had treated you and others unfairly. It could have been taking a foreign language course or organic chemistry – which is a foreign language to me! Did you ever have to break off a relationship, which in your heart you did not want to end, but in your head, you knew it was best? Perhaps you were faced with becoming the caregiver for a loved one who was dying and you were afraid you did not have the strength it would take. If you served in the military, you may have been given a mission you thought you would not survive.

God’s call of Moses to return to Egypt to break the bondage of his fellow Hebrews was a startling intrusion into the life he had planned. Moses was tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he discerned God’s voice threatening to shatter his calm existence: “I have observed the misery of my people...So I will send you to Pharaoh to bring them out of Egypt.”

Some can point to one defining moment that forever altered the course of their lives. A personal crisis, an extraordinary opportunity or revulsion toward an injustice spurred them to take a new direction. They may have

made a snap decision, or they may have wrestled with it, conjuring up all of the reasons they should not take up this challenge. This is precisely how Moses responded to God's call.

The first excuse that spills out of his mouth is: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" It is the first in a string of excuses Moses offers in hopes of dodging God's mission.

It does not take a Rhodes Scholar to figure out why Moses was not enthusiastic about God's plan. Most of us have confronted challenges we doubted we could handle. This is the story of Moses. God called him to a bold mission fraught with risk. Moses was to liberate his fellow Hebrews from a tyrant determined to keep them enslaved.

Remember that Moses had grown up in Egypt and had witnessed the brutality of the taskmasters and the injustice of slavery. He knew all too well that Pharaoh was a harsh dictator intent on building monuments to his glory and he fulfilled his dream not with willing laborers, but on the backs of slaves.

When Moses discerned God's voice beckoning him to return to Egypt, it is no mystery why Moses began backing up and looking for the off ramp. Moses was afraid. He feared confronting Pharaoh and he feared failure.

I suspect no one here can identify with Moses hearing God's voice speaking out of a burning bush, but who cannot relate to Moses facing a stiff challenge and fearing: "I am not up to the task. I don't have what it takes to accomplish such a feat."

Most of us fall short of becoming the full person God wants us to be because we are plagued by self-doubt. We tell ourselves, "I've never done this before and I don't believe I can do it now." Self-doubt can halt us in our tracks and prevent us from accomplishing great things. Self-doubt can insure us that we won't, because it keeps whispering in our ears that we can't. Shakespeare called our doubts traitors, because they rob us of the good we might have won by making us afraid to even attempt it.

How many times over the course of our lives have we deflected God's summons by saying, "Not me. I don't have what it takes."

How does God respond to the first excuse Moses offers? God says, "I will be with you." God assures Moses that we are never alone when we embark on difficult missions. God is with us.

However, God's response does not seem all that comforting to Moses. He was hoping for something along the lines of 1,000 battle-tested warriors backing him up.

I suspect most of us can identify with Moses. It is fine to know that God is with us when we take on something difficult, but we want more tangible assurance that we will succeed. We want proof that the deck is stacked in our favor and that our mission cannot lose. God with us does not seem like enough.

Unconvinced that God's presence will assure success, Moses tries a different tactic. He says, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you' and they ask me, 'What is the name of the one who sent you?' What shall I say to them?"

God replies with the enigmatic response: "I AM WHO I AM or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." In Hebrew it can mean either.

Richard Rohr says, "God stays in the dialogue, answering Moses respectfully and even intimately, offering a promise of personal Presence and an ever-sustaining glimpse into who God is – Being Itself, Existence Itself, a

nameless God beyond all names, a formless God previous to all forms, a liberator God who is utterly liberated. God asserts God's ultimate freedom from human attempts to capture God in concepts and words by saying, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."

God's reply is hardly satisfying. We want to be able to nail down who God is. But, of course, as soon as we do, we know we are not talking about the Creator of all that is, the One who is always more than we can grasp.

Moses is skeptical that if he tells the Hebrews "I AM" sent me it will clinch the deal. He predicts how the people will reply: "Suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'"

Not only does Moses balk at embracing God's summons because of his own self-doubt, but he also hesitates to take on God's call because others will have doubts about him.

I'm not asking for a show of hands, but have you ever worried that others will find out that you are not as smart as they think you are? Have you ever tried to cover up that you are not as confident as some think you are? Have you ever tried to conceal that you are not as brave as some think you are?

Moses is reluctant to embrace God's mission because he is plagued by self-doubt. He is not the smartest, bravest, or most confident person. He is certain that there are others who are eminently more qualified. He reminds God that he is not even a good speaker. Others are far more gifted. He pleads, "Lord, please send someone else."

Moses wants what most of us want when we face a stiff challenge. Guarantees! He wants a guarantee that God will be with him each step of the way. He wants a guarantee that it really is God's voice that he has discerned. He wants a guarantee that the Hebrew slaves will believe that God has sent him. He wants a guarantee that he will be able to dazzle the Pharaoh with amazing feats. He wants a guarantee that he will be able to speak confidently and convincingly.

Moses is tormented by self-doubt and wants a guarantee that the Pharaoh will listen to him, and his mission will be a success. But, God gives no guarantee. God simply says, "Your brother Aaron will be with him and I will be with you and that is sufficient."

It was no different for the prophets who came after Moses. It was no different for the disciples of Jesus or the Apostle Paul. No guarantees that their missions would be successful. In fact, Paul was executed after firing off letters to congregations where the people were constantly squabbling. No doubt he imagined he had completely failed, and yet he succeeded beyond his wildest imagination.

The most difficult thing you ever do is often the most rewarding. It is an incredible boost to your faith to conquer a mountain you feared was too steep.

God believed in Moses more than Moses believed in himself, and it is the same with us. You have more gifts than you imagine. You have more influence than you imagine. When you work in harmony with God, it creates a divine-human synergy that can accomplish more than you imagine. You cannot consider what you have done in the past and simply project forward more of the same. There are times when God beckons you to sacrifice the safety of your current routine and risk breaking new ground.

Rather than self-absorbed security, God challenges Moses to risk everything for the benefit of others. Moses is to put his life on the line not only because justice demands that captives be liberated, but because in giving ourselves for others we become our truest selves, our richest selves, our fullest selves. Every mother who sacrifices for her child knows this truth.

God gives you the freedom to respond as you choose. Moses could have walked away from the burning bush and settled for grazing sheep. But, in the end, despite his doubts, he embraced God's call and it led to an incredible adventure.

Do you have the courage to live your faith? God beckons you to head out on a journey and to remain faithful come what may, because God wants to use you to bring light to the dark places in our world.

Vincent Van Gogh said, "If you hear a voice within you say *you cannot paint*, then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced."

When God summons you if a voice says *you cannot succeed*, shut it down with the firm resolve, "Here I am, Lord. Let's go!"

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Grace, in whom we live and move and have our being – you have beckoned us to this holy ground and welcomed us into your presence. We give thanks for your Spirit moving among us, opening our hearts and minds to encounter you in new ways. Help us to hear your Still Small Voice whispering into the silence ... Speak Lord, for your servants are listening.

We are listening for your voice to disrupt the din of this world, and to call forth order out of chaos. God, sometimes we feel so powerless in the face of turmoil and pain and strife. We do not know how best to respond when storms wreak havoc, or when neighbors turn against neighbors. Yet, we trust that you are present in the midst of brokenness, bringing comfort to those who suffer and empowering others to work for justice and peace. We remember those in war-torn lands and communities rent by conflict, for whom justice seems a distant memory and peace, a faraway dream. We pray for those in regions affected by Hurricane Matthew; who now face the challenge of rebuilding, even as they are weighed down by grief. We lift up those near and far who suffer – openly or in silence– with abuse, addiction, illness, or loss.

Loving God, breathe your healing Spirit upon all in need of your comfort, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness.

In every age, you have called ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Draw us, we pray, into your redemptive work. Holy God, we confess that we are not always eager to respond to your call. Too often we prove to be timid disciples; we are quick to utter excuses and slow to exclaim, "Here I Am!" Like Moses, many of us think too little of ourselves rather than trusting your Spirit to sustain us in our callings. Yet – despite our doubt – you *do* sustain us, O God of Life. For you go with us to every place we are sent. Help us place our trust in you – not in our own gifts or abilities – and grant us courage to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. Give us faithful hearts and prophetic voices, we pray, that we may use them for your glory until all creation knows the abundance of your love and grace.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us to ministry – Jesus the Christ – who taught us how to pray: "**Our Father ...**"