

PRELUDE TO FREEDOM: 2. GOD EMPOWERS

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Exodus 4:1-17

Last Sunday, I posed this question to you, “What is God calling you to do?” We were looking at the passage from Exodus where God calls to Moses from the burning bush. The Israelite people had resided in Egypt for generations. However, for three centuries, they had been enslaved and forced to build cities for the pharaoh. Moses is born—a child of the Hebrews. One day, he encounters an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses intervenes and kills the Egyptian and hides the body in the sand. Moses is forced to flee the country, so he heads across the wilderness to Midian. In Midian, he marries a daughter of the priest of Midian and goes to work for his father-in-law as a shepherd. One day, while shepherding far from Midian on the slopes of Mount Horeb (which we also know as Mount Sinai), Moses experiences a theophany. God appears before him as a burning fire in the midst of a bush. God informs Moses that God has heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt and God intends to send Moses to convince the pharaoh to allow his people to leave. Theologically, we view this as God calling Moses to go to the pharaoh.

In our reading for today, Moses expresses his reluctance to follow God’s call. Moses argues, “But what if they don't believe me or listen to me? What if they say ‘the Lord did not appear to you?’ What then?” Frankly, these are legitimate concerns. Who among us doesn't get a little suspicious when someone shows up telling us that their plans are based on what God has ordered them to do? I'm reminded of the great insight by the comedian Lily Tomlin who said, “Why is it that when we talk to God we're said to be praying, but when God talks to us we are schizophrenic?” Moses is worried that he is going to go back to his people with this big plan from “God” and they will laugh him right back out of town.

So in response to Moses’ doubts, God arms Moses with some powers that he can use to get the people’s attention. First, God asks Moses what Moses is holding in his hand. Moses tells God that it is a staff. God instructs Moses to throw the staff on the ground. Moses does so and the staff transforms into a snake. (Pretty cool.) God instructs Moses to grab the snake by the tail and when Moses does this the snake reverts to being a staff.

Secondly, God tells Moses to put his hand inside of his cloak. Moses does so and when he pulls his hand out it is white and looks like it has leprosy. (Not so cool.) God tells him to put the hand back into his cloak and the hand is restored to normal.

Third, God informs Moses that he can take some water from the Nile River and pour it on the ground and the water shall become blood.

In my opinion, none of this is very impressive. At best, these are second-rate parlor tricks—what you might see at a kid’s birthday party when the clown you hired cancels but sends his brother-in-law who is “getting into magic.” These are not powers worthy of the Lord. They are not intended to be used to sway the pharaoh, just to get the attention of the Israelite leaders. But it doesn't matter, because Moses never needs to employ these tricks. Moses is afraid that no one will listen to him or believe him, that no one will accept his divine commission, so God arms him with these magic tricks.

Moses is still not convinced that he is capable of heeding God's call. Moses throws out a second objection arguing that he is a poor public speaker. He says, *Lord, I have never been eloquent, not in the past, and not even now talking to you. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.* According to Moses, if God is looking for a spokesman, then God has the wrong guy. But God reminds Moses that he need not worry because the ability to speak comes from God. *Who gives speech to morals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Go,* God tells Moses, *I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.*

Nevertheless, Moses continues pleading, *Lord, please send someone else.* At this point now, God has had enough, and somewhat testily says to Moses, “What about your brother, Aaron? He speaks well. Here's the plan: I will speak to you, and you will tell Aaron what to say. Aaron shall speak for you to the public. He shall serve as a mouth for you.”

Returning to my question from last week, I asked, “What is God calling you to do?” I believe that God is calling us all to some task, to some ministry. Rarely is that call as clear and specific as Moses’ call on Mount Horeb. It would be hard to deny the voice of the Lord (as played by James Earl Jones) resounding from a roaring inferno. We would get the message. Or would we? I think that every call from the Lord is the same as the one given to Moses: “I want you to stand up to power and demand freedom for the oppressed.” That was the message to Moses, and that is the message to us all. Ministry is identifying and addressing the needs of the oppressed, of people in pain. Those who are oppressed may be the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the victims of violence, the disabled, the minority, the alien, the incarcerated, or more. Looking at it this way, I think that every ministry can be defined as confronting the powers of oppression. That is our call.

But how many of us, when we receive their call, start making excuses as to why we can't respond? Like Moses, we say, “But what if no one believes me or listens to me?” And we begin to list our weaknesses and insecurities as why we are unfit?

God does not call the unfit. God’s call may challenge you and stretch you, but it does not set you up for failure.

What we see here, and in other places in Scripture, is that God equips us for the task at hand. Moses said, what if they won't listen to me? And God gives him some flashy, attention-getting magic tricks which he never needs to use. Moses argued, I'm terrible at public speaking, and God sent Aaron to speak for him. When Jesus sent the disciples out he provided them with power and authority. As we read in Matthew, *Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness* (Matthew 10:1).

Moreover, the greatest promise that God makes to those who are called is that God goes with us. As God said to Moses, *I will be with you* (3:12). We are not sent out to minister alone. God is with us.

I want to finish with a reference to an old movie—a children's movie. Those of you of a certain age will recall a movie put out by Disney in 1975 called *Escape to Witch Mountain*. It was a huge success for Disney. There have been remakes of this movie including a made-for-tv movie in 1995 and a 2009 movie starring Dwayne Johnson, aka, The Rock. According to the reviews, that movie is so bad as to be unwatchable. All of these movies are based on a book by Alexander Key which was published in 1969 which I read in middle school. It is about two children who have exceptional powers. It turns out that they are aliens from another planet and are on the run from evil forces that want to profit from their abilities. In the book, those evil forces are communists. By 1975, when the movie was made, communists apparently weren't as frightening and were replaced by a greedy capitalist.

While on the run, the children are befriended by a man named Jason O'Day. In the movie he is just a crotchety old guy rambling around in his Winnebago. In the book, he is a priest who runs a downtown mission. At the end of the book, when the evil forces have the children isolated on a hilltop, Father O'Day (who is a physically large man) makes a statement of faith that impressed me then and which has stuck with me. Father O'Day understands that his calling to help those in peril, whether they were the people who came into his mission or these strange children, and he understood his God-given abilities. At the end of the book there is this passage:

“...for a moment it looked to Father O'Day as if he might have trouble on his hands. He smiled in sudden anticipation and took a step forward. There were six of them, but the Lord had given him a mighty body, and there was no better spot than a mountaintop for taking on the minions of the devil.”

As I said, this is a book for kids. But in it we discover this wonderful description of this man who knows his calling and knows what his abilities are and is willing to use them. As it turns out, he didn't have to do anything. The bad guys just ran away.

In this children's book, in the stories of scripture, in the stories we share with one another, we learn that we have gifts to use when we are called. These gifts provide the ability to answer that call. But best of all, when we do answer the call, we are never alone. We may go with one another, but we will always go with God.

And for this we can be truly thankful. Amen.