

“Call Waiting”

Exodus 3:1-15

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most important passages in the Bible. It is the call of Moses by God to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt.

If I compiled a list of Old Testament passages everyone should study to understand more clearly who God is and how God works in our world, this one would be on it. I consider today's text this important to our spiritual development. Let me share the details of this dramatic story with you.

The story begins with Moses tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, a priest of Midian. The reader has to wonder what Moses was doing in such a remote place somewhere on or near the Sinai Peninsula. After all, Moses was born in Egypt to Hebrew parents, but he was reared as a child of privilege by Pharaoh's daughter.

Moses had to leave Egypt abruptly and flee to the region of the Midianites after it was discovered he killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a Hebrew worker. Pharaoh was incensed about what Moses did and vowed to kill him for this act of violence against an Egyptian.

Since Moses was well known by most Egyptians, he had to go to a place where he would be anonymous to find safety. While on the run, he came across a well in the region of Midian and stopped to rest.

At that rest stop, he came to the rescue of Jethro's seven daughters whose animals were being denied access to water from the well by the other shepherds. When Jethro heard about Moses' concern and courage, he invited Moses to stay with him and his family.

To sweeten the offer, Jethro gave Moses one of his daughters, Zipporah, in marriage. It is apparent Jethro needed a man to help run the family business, and he wasn't going to let Moses get away.

One day while Moses was on Mount Horeb guiding and guarding Jethro's sheep, his attention was drawn to a bush which seemed to be on fire but was not consumed. As he approached this bush, he heard a voice from heaven telling him to take off his shoes, for he was standing on holy ground.

God proceeded to inform Moses He was aware of the plight of the Hebrew people in Egypt and wanted to deliver them from their life of oppression, misery and despair. God also told Moses He wanted him to be a partner in this endeavor by going to Pharaoh and demanding he let the Israelites go free.

Immediately, Moses offered resistance, knowing this challenge was filled with great risks and dangers. I understand Moses' hesitancy.

"There is no safe place," Tom Ehrich writes, "when one is called, in any role, to be God's person among the broken and lost." If your highest priority is to play it safe, there are many places you will not go regardless of how many burning bush encounters you have with God.

This was Moses' struggle. Without a doubt, Egypt was not a safe place for him, and this mission had failure written all over it.

How could Moses return to Egypt without being killed? Why would Pharaoh even listen to him, much less give in to his demand? Would Moses' own people have enough confidence in him to follow his lead? How could he convince the Israelites this encounter with God was real, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had sent him to lead them?

All of these questions and many others led a skeptical Moses to ask, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God said, "I will be with you, and this will be a sign to you that it is I who sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I Am who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. 'I Am has sent me to you.' " (Exodus 3:11-14)

The tug-of-war between God and Moses continued for some time as Moses offered more excuses and even greater resistance to God's call and challenge. Finally, Moses embraced God's dream and agreed to go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. He returned to Egypt with his family and Jethro's blessing to prepare his people for their epic journey to freedom.

How does this story speak to us today? Obviously, there are many lessons to be gleaned from the divine encounter Moses had with God. The one I wish to highlight this morning is this.

I believe this story teaches us the difference between God's purpose for our lives and God's call upon our lives.

As Christians, I believe all of us share the same purpose for living. Our purpose is to honor God by making the world a better place for all people to live.

Each of us must seize every opportunity that comes our way to build healthy, safe, peaceful and prosperous communities, beginning in our homes and extending to the far reaches of the globe. In addition, we must offer everything we are and all we have to God as we make a commitment to build bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation to those around us instead of walls of suspicion, prejudice and hate.

This is our common purpose for living. No one is exempt from this mandate. Whatever career you choose to pursue, or wherever life takes you as you go through its many phases and stages, this purpose never changes. We are to honor God by making this world a better place for all people to live.

On the other hand, God's call upon our lives varies and is specific. God's call to each of us is dependent upon three things: what is going on around us; what we possess to meet a specific need; and what God is willing to do to help us meet that need.

God's call to Moses was connected to the pleas for help God heard from the lips of Moses' family members, friends and neighbors. Their living conditions were unbearable, and they were at the breaking point. God's heart was touched, and God's spirit was moved to respond to their cry for help.

This was why God showed up that day on Mount Horeb. The encounter with Moses was connected directly to the need to respond to the injustice Moses' people were enduring, and the misery it was producing.

“ ‘The cry of the Israelites has reached me,’ God said to Moses at the burning bush, ‘and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ ” (Exodus 3:9-10)

You want to know what God's specific call upon your life is this week. As you go about your daily chores and tasks, be aware of what is going on around you. Then listen carefully as God speaks to you about the difference you can make by calling someone's name, listening to their story, offering a word of encouragement, extending a helping hand, taking a dish of food,

buying some groceries, being their advocate and opening doors of opportunity for them to chart a new course.

God calls each of us to make hope visible by sharing what we have with those around us who are hurting. When God hears the pleas for help from those who are struggling, God goes directly to those who can make a difference, just as God went to Moses.

However, it is not only a call and a challenge God places before each of us every day. God also promises to accompany us on our faith journey, providing what we need to meet every challenge.

Every excuse Moses offered God was matched by the promise of God's presence and provisions. Even God's name communicated His power and faithfulness.

I shall never forget how Dr. Roy Honeycutt, Jr. interpreted the name given to God in this passage. This world renowned Old Testament scholar, who wrote the commentary for Exodus in the original Broadman Bible Commentary, taught the book of Exodus when I was a student in the seminary. I can still hear his words and recall the notes I took.

“Although it is impossible to fully comprehend the author's intent when relaying God's name to his readers, it appears God's name has the characteristics of a verb, not a noun. In all probability, it is based upon the verb, *hayah*, to be. ‘I Am that I Am’ means: I will do whatever I must do or become whatever I must become to save, redeem and take care of my people. No task is too menial, no sacrifice is too great, and no challenge is too big. God is distant and intimate. God is hidden and known. God is ‘other than’ and incarnate. At all times and in every place, God is working on our behalf.”

In other words, the ever present and active One who approached Moses on Mt. Horeb promised Moses he would accompany him on this dangerous mission and provide the courage, confidence, wisdom and resources Moses needed. I believe God will do the same for all who accept His call and challenge.

Do you believe this? If you are like me, there are times when you do, and there are times when you are not so sure.

Looking back, I recall days when I followed Moses' example and went to Egypt. On the other hand, there were days when I stayed on the friendly slopes of Mt. Horeb.

I wonder what I will do this week.

What about you? What is going on around you? What do you think you will do this week when God calls you to respond to someone's plea for help? Will you go to Egypt or remain on the friendly slopes of Mt. Horeb?

Frederick Buechner is an American writer and theologian whose career has spanned six decades. His words in his book, Wishful Thinking, speak to us today.

"The place God calls you to is where your deepest gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

I hope you find that place many times this week.