

“Called for a Purpose”

Manuscript of sermon by Erin Hawkins

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(Scripture readings from Exodus 3 and 1 Corinthians 12)

There were two scriptures read this morning and I will touch on them both but I'd like to start with the passage from Exodus. In it, God is commissioning Moses. God's calling of Moses is sparked in the narrative by God's compassion for the oppressed and hurting. God has heard the cries of the Israelites and feels their pain. In response, he sends Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, out of the systems, circumstances, and, later as we would learn, mindsets that keep them in bondage. Moses is reluctant to take on such a weighty role, and asks God, "Why me?" To which God responds, don't worry boo. I got you! I will be with you. Then verse 13 and 14 of the passage reads:

¹³Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What do I tell them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you.'" This has always been my name and this is how I will always be known.

Just as in this narrative, God's call always accompanies a purpose – whether you are fully aware of it or not. A divine assignment to be a light in a world where darkness looms. The enslaved Israelites could no longer bear the forces of Empire being built on their backs, their labor exploited, their humanity denied and their futures stolen, so they cried out.

This ancient story is not so ancient. There are many ways to be enslaved. How many industries in this country profit from exploitation, oppression and dehumanization? How many people find themselves enslaved to conditions such as poverty, addiction, chronic mental and physical illness because said industries profit from and spend billions of dollars to teach us to be apathetic to their plight?

And not all enslavement is collective. We can be enslaved by our own cynicism our hopelessness, our isolation and loneliness. These forms of enslavement are also exploited by the apathy, disregard, and selfishness of those who witness or may be wonder, but never act in the face of the challenges.

Walter Brueggemann says in his book *Journey to the Common Good*, "Every system of exploitation eventually learns that unbearable suffering has its limits." And when the limit is reached two things happen. First the unbearable suffering comes to public speech and then the cry of the suffering finds its way to the ears of YHWH.

We see this happening now. The reemergence of the protest movement. The activist calls to resist oppression in all its forms. Documentaries and stories of the insidious realities of racism, sexism, queer and transphobia to name a few. These are all examples of the public narrative of suffering.

My office is on the 4th floor of the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. From my office I can look out and see the front steps of the Capitol

Building. From the other window I can look out and see the front steps of the Supreme Court. So let's just say I'm right in the middle of the action. It is not uncommon for us to witness protests of all kinds – large and small – representing progressive, moderate and conservative causes. Most recently those protests have become more frequent. Those of us in the Methodist building routinely get emails alerting us to the fact that the surrounding roads will be closed limiting access to the building. It can be a real pain in the you know what. But it is interesting as I reflect on this how easy experiencing the cries of the suffering through public protest, whether I agree with their position or not, has become for us as the usual course of business. We're almost numb to it. Or we become frustrated with it.

When suffering finds its public voice, it can be confronting and uncomfortable. And we don't like to be made uncomfortable. To have our business interrupted, to remember that the suffering have a story that matters, too. A story worth hearing, a story worth responding to. The suffering of the exploited and oppressed, enslaved, the broken hearted, the frustrated and the disillusioned has its limits. How much generational trauma, physical and mental abuse, historical harm, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism and homophobia do we expect a community to take? And while we harden our hearts like Pharaoh against the Israelites because our meeting was disrupted, someone who desperately needed to hear a word from the Lord sat in our church last Sunday; another story of death by gun violence in cities, our divisions about how we should value and safe guard human life, the cries of the suffering are reaching the ears of God.

Brueggemann goes on to say that the cries of human suffering evoke a divine resolve. In this interaction with Moses, the text says God hears the Israelites cry and has "come down" to deliver them. In the midst of the pain, chaos and uncertainty, God meets us where we are. In the dark, lowly places of despair as well as on the mountaintops of joy.

And finally, Brueggemann says when the breaking point of suffering has been reached and God's resolve to transform the situation is activated, a decisive moment in human history appears in which there is an opportunity to turn away from oppression, exclusion and violence and toward an alternative possibility, one in which human agency is required. Simply put, God calls us for a purpose. God calls us to preach good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, seek liberation for those held captive, and pardon those who are enslaved.

Moses resists the call and raises a number of objections to which God responds. Moses first pleads his own lack of skills and qualifications. "Who am I?" he asks. God responds. None of that matters; "I will be with you."

After turning from the question of his own identity, Moses turns to the question of God's identity. "[When] they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" Moses ponders in verse 13. God's cryptic response is, "I am who I am" or as some theologians have opined, "I will be what I will be."

I love God's answer because through it God is saying, in a sense, "Don't box me in, Moses!" But it also, has a future cast to it as well. "*I will be . . .*" No matter how you

interpret God's answer to Moses perhaps what God is actually trying to get us to see is that we can't really know who God is unless we're willing to join God in God's beingness. And where does God be? In the world, so that's where we must be as well to know God - to sign on for God's mission in the world.

To know God, you have to go with God. Faith is a full contact, participation sport. As Wesleyan Methodists we believe that personal piety is not enough, those who follow Jesus must get out of the stands and get in the game, take a risk, try something marvelous, reach for something you thought unachievable, step out onto the winding road the end of which you can't see from your doorstep

And not only is God being in the world and calling us to join God there, God has promised from the old testament to the new that God will be with us.

We celebrate the ministries of those commissioned, retiring and licensed. They have answered God's call with a yes, and are following God into the world offering their gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 affirms and, in fact, insists that the offering of diverse gifts is essential for the healthy functioning of Christian community. This work of following God into the world is not work that we can effectively do alone. Although Moses was called by God, we know the story of leading the Israelite people to liberation was not something he accomplished on his own.

I believe that God has placed gifts in each and every one of us that God then calls forth for service in response to a world in need. Like the church in Corinth we often make the mistake of valuing certain gifts and callings as legitimate ministry and undervaluing others. How you choose to live out your call is up to you, but never ever doubt that God is calling you for a purpose. That purpose does not have to be at the level of Moses leading the Israelite people out of slavery in order for it to be valuable to the Body of Christ. God is calling each of us for a purpose and that call is always unfolding, revealing, clarifying, inspiring, convicting now and now and now... Can't you feel the urgency of it?

God's call is not a one-time shot but is dynamic and always beckoning us to draw closer to where Christ is - in the immigrant children living in cages at the border, the homeless veterans whose wounds have never been sufficiently tended to, the elderly who have no one to care for them, the disabled who are shut out of full participation in society, the trans black and brown women who fear for their life every time they leave their homes.

The suffering of the world feels very much near a breaking point - despite the connectivity of technology we are more polarized and isolated than ever. Some continue to suffer silently while others are giving their suffering a public voice. And through it all God's promise is true, "I will be with you." The same God that called Moses to lead the Israelite people to cross the parted water and to the promised land with a promise of "I will be with you" will be with you, too. The same God that kept Native People's through the Trail of Tears, people of African descent through the

Middle Passage, Latino people through desperate desert crossings, and never left them will be with you, too. The same God who so loved the world, made the word flesh and sent it to dwell amongst us teaching us to live as compassionate healers, prophetic leaders and servants of embodied love and gave up that son so that we might have life. God did that for you and will be with you. As he departed, Jesus' command to the disciples was to go into all the world and what did he say? I will be with you, even to the ends of the age.

You're calling is God's great testimony of love for humanity - I will be. I will be shelter, I will be food, I will be companionship, I will be justice, I will be peace. I will call my people out into the world where I am always being now and now and now and now; and they will be my means of transformation in every home, every church, every city, every state, and all around the world for the glory of God who desires a liberated and abundant life for all of humanity. Amen.