

Pentecost 23—Supplemental
Exodus 4:1-17
When God Calls

Do you screen your calls? A lot of people do these days. Caller ID is on nearly all cell phones and most have the service on their land lines as well. When you see who is calling, you may decide not to take the call, but to let it go to voice mail. You'll answer the call later, or maybe not at all.

Can you imagine your phone ringing and you take a look at the caller ID, and it says there: "Lord God Almighty." Hey, it's got to be a prank, right? But let's just say, you somehow knew it wasn't a prank. God is literally calling you. He has something to say to you. Would your heart start to pound? Would your mouth go dry? Would your thoughts race? Why is God calling? What is he going to say?

In our sermon today, we consider this thought. The truth is: God really does call each of us. In fact, he calls repeatedly. And like it or not, we will answer. There is no way around it. Let's talk about what happens when God calls.

When you read a passage like this, it makes you wonder why so many people hold Moses in such high regard. This is not Moses' finest hour. He doesn't sound much like a Bible hero. At this point in time, he's eighty years old. First, Moses is born into a world where infanticide is official imperial policy. His mother saves his life with some courageous concealment and then there's the amazing basket-in-the-river stunt. He then is pampered as a royal prince, brought up as though he were the pharaoh's daughter's own son. It was probably in the royal court that he became literate, utilizing the new Egyptian technologies of pen, ink, and papyrus. Then at age forty he prematurely tries to play the role of Hebrew avenger. He murders an Egyptian, serving as his judge and executioner. He flees for his life and ends up grateful to be in witness protection among Jethro and his fellow Midianite bedouins. He marries and has a family, figuring probably that he will never see his fellow Israelites again. Forty years later, he's an old man.

This is the same man who would later write in Psalm 90: "*The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty if we have the strength*" (10). Eighty years was on the upper end of the average life expectancy and Moses was there. As far as he could tell, life was winding down—until he came across a bush on Mt. Sinai that was on fire but wasn't burning up. God was in that bush. After telling Moses to take off his sandals because the place where he was standing was holy ground, the LORD proceeds to inform him that his life isn't winding down. It's only just begun: I see the misery of my people in Egypt; I hear them crying out under their slave drivers; and I'm concerned. I'm sending you to go and get them out and lead them to their new home and I'm going to go with you.

So with those circumstances in mind, maybe we can understand why Moses wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to go. It's like telling the marathon runner a hundred yards before the finish line that you're adding another ten miles and it is all uphill: I'm tired, Lord. I don't want to do it! Except, of course, that's not the way he said it: "What if they do not believe me when I tell them about the burning bush and your promise to deliver?" (1) But God had already thought of that: "Throw your staff on the ground." (It became a snake.) "Now grab the snake by the tail." (It became a staff again.) (2-4)

Next: "Stick your hand into the fold of your cloak." (It became leprous.) "Now put your hand back in your cloak." (His hand was healed.) (6-7)

Next: “Pour some Nile water on some dry dust.” (The water became blood.) “When they see the snake and the leprosy and the blood, they’ll believe you.” (8-9)

Okay, Moses has to think of something else: “My tongue is clumsy. I stumble over words. I’m not the guy to be your voice to the Israelites, much less your ambassador to Pharaoh” (10). You can hear God beginning to grow perturbed. He responds to Moses with the kind of questions a five-year-old can answer: “Who made a mouth for people? Do you really think I can’t give you the words to say? Do you really think I’m going to send you to keep my five-hundred-year-old promise to two million people and then turn my back on you and let you twist in the wind?” (11-12) At this point we realize something that Moses obviously didn’t. Like a parent who tells their kid to go clean his room, God wasn’t offering him a choice. It wasn’t up for debate. But the eighty-year-old shows himself as a true five-year-old once he runs out of excuses: “*Please, Lord, send someone else*” (13).

Is this really the same guy that played arguably the most significant human role in the Old Testament: that God used to write the first five books of the Bible, to part the Red Sea, to deliver the Ten Commandments, to bring the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the border of the Promised Land? He sounds an awful lot like a whiner. Or maybe I shouldn’t be too quick to say that. He sounds an awful lot like me.

Not that I’ve ever had a burning-bush experience. But God has other ways of assigning us work to do that don’t involve mysterious fires and miraculous signs. Some of it is the result of our own choices: A young man and woman decide to get married. They have so much more to do than plan a wedding. They have a God-given responsibility toward one another to be selfless, to be faithful, to forgive, to stick together as one flesh through thick and through thin as long as they both shall live. Or you decide to take a job. You decide to join a church. All those choices come with God-given responsibilities, whether to be respectful of your boss or faithful to your fellow members and your Lord in your use of time, talent, treasures, and prayers. Other ways that God assigns us work to do aren’t direct results of our own choices: Kids don’t get to pick their parents or fast-forward into adulthood. They’ve got a God-given job to obey, to respect, and to make their parents’ work a joy and not a burden.

Are those examples sufficient to show that God still gives us work to do? The method may be different from the way he called Moses—no burning bush. And the particular assignment may be different—not two million slaves to free, but it’s still the same God. And it’s still his work.

Where we all can identify most clearly with Moses’ hunt for excuses is when we feel like the marathon runner who discovers that the race isn’t over yet, and it’s going to be a whole lot longer and harder than we thought. Have you ever felt that way in your marriage? The wedding and the honeymoon are distant memories, and your spouse is no longer the person you remember marrying. It didn’t go the way you thought it would. It doesn’t look like it’s going to change—and you’re tired. Have you felt that way with your parents? You’d take anyone else’s parents over your own. You didn’t get to pick them. They don’t try to understand you. And you’re tired. Apply it to anything else that’s hard and unfair, where God has called you to do a job that’s not what you signed up for, not what you wanted, just when you were getting ready to take a break he turned up the intensity—and we just might find ourselves sounding like Moses.

Moses had his conversation directly with God—trying to convince the Almighty that he wasn’t the right man for the job. Our whining is more likely to take place just in our heads—trying to convince ourselves that the way God has set it up, it just isn’t right. Maybe staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night or in the car when there’s finally a moment of peace—a

thousand different reasons why we're not up for the job: I just can't be a faithful husband when nothing I do is ever good enough. She'd be better off with someone else. My boss has stepped on me too many times. My parents are too detached. To convince ourselves in one way or another that we have a legitimate "out." I'm too tired. I can't. And maybe, like it was with Moses, it takes someone else to point out to us that our true concern isn't that we can't. It's that we don't want to.

The burning bush wasn't the only thing on fire. "*The LORD's anger burned against Moses*" (14). Not for committing adultery or bowing down to an idol, but for—it doesn't seem like that big of a deal—whining. It makes you wonder how many times his anger has burned against us and we haven't even noticed because we were convinced that we were in the right and he was wrong. "*The LORD's anger burned against Moses.*" Makes you wonder why he didn't set Moses on fire and find someone else to do it or just go the easiest route and do it himself! But instead of getting rid of Moses, he still uses him. And more than that, he still helps him: "Your brother Aaron is already on his way. He'll help you talk. In spite of your shortcomings and your whining, I'm still going to use you. I'm still going to help you. I'm still going to go with you and I'll never turn my back" (14-17).

It's a powerful picture of the LORD's forgiveness. What does he do to us for whining, for distorting the Christian life into a personal realm of selfishness where we only do the work we want to do and kick to the curb whatever else he gives us to do? Turns out, that's the wrong question. This isn't about what he does to us; it's what he does for us. He doesn't give up on us so easily. Whenever his anger burns, his forgiveness puts out the fire. He already let out his anger at his Son on the cross, he doesn't have any left for you. He doesn't take revenge. He doesn't say: "Fine, you're on your own and I'm making it even harder." He continues to set the work before us: to be faithful to our spouse, obedient to our parents, diligent in our work, and he says: "I'm with you. I'm fully aware of what you're capable of and what you need, and in whatever area you're weak, I'll more than make up the difference. I forgive you when you grumble, I'll pick you up when you collapse, I'll always send the right person at the right time to help you—to be your Aaron. And through you," God says, "I will accomplish my work."

That's the key to understanding why so many people hold Moses in such high regard. (When we read the New Testament, we see that even Jesus does.) He's a standout example of what God can accomplish through the weakest of sinners. God takes an eighty-year-old exile who barely survived infancy, who grew up with the enemy, who has blood on his hands and a mouthful of excuses, and he uses him to keep a five-hundred-year-old promise to two million people that was woven into his larger promise to save us too. It's not for what Moses offered God; it's for what God did through Moses. That God would use him as his partner in showing his love and keeping his promises.

Can you translate that over to yourself and the work that God has called you to do? It's his work, and he doesn't stop at forgiving our whining about it. He still gives you the honor of being his partner, to be his instrument to show his love and keep his promises. The work he calls you to do, he equips you to do. It's hard work, but that's why he never leaves you alone. That's why he never turns his back on you. That's why he shows how much he can accomplish through people just like you. Amen.