



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Fully Rely...”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Exodus 3: 1-12; Jeremiah 4: 1-10

January 31, 2016

As I came across this passage from Jeremiah for this morning’s service, and as it so quickly reminded me of the classic verbal sparring match that takes place between Moses and God at the burning bush, I simply could help but be reminded of how good we are at making excuses – and how it is, frankly, nothing new.

It doesn’t even seem to matter, that much, exactly what the circumstance is – we are just very good at getting out of that which we don’t want to do by coming up with some incredibly creative justifications for not showing up, following through, living up to, or otherwise tending to certain obligations in our lives.

It seems to start, in very basic ways, when we are very young. It is amazing, as a parent of younger children, to note how frequently they get headaches, upset stomachs, sore throats, aching legs, or any of a hundred other maladies just at that moment that they have to get ready to go to that event they don’t want to attend, do that practice they don’t want to do, eat that food they don’t want to eat, and so on, and so on, and so on...

Then, as we get older, we get a little more creative, but the underlying reality doesn’t seem to change.

- Emails to which we don’t really want to reply get mysteriously sent to our spam boxes and we never notice they arrived.
- Calls we don’t want to receive get swallowed up in voicemail systems and we never get the call.
- Meetings we don’t want to attend just happen to fall on the night we have promised to dog-sit for our friends up the road.
- And projects we don’t want to finish suddenly become strikingly less important than whatever it we’ve decided we would rather do in that particular moment.

And, then, we come to our faith – to the call of God in our lives – and we just take it that much further. We push aside God’s call in our lives because we don’t have the experience...because

we don't have the knowledge...because we don't have the courage...because we don't like talking in front of people...because we believe we don't have the requisite capacity, ability, background, training, foresight, will, mental agility, or some other thing that becomes the understandable and justifiable reason that we are simply not up to the task at hand. And, each and every time, whether we realize it or not, God comes back at us with the same answer. 'That's absurd and I don't buy it. Because, in the end, it's not what YOU can do that matters!'

Look at these two exchanges that we hear in the passages we read this morning. Jeremiah is, I am certain, the more unfamiliar of these two passages. But, the exchange is very much like that of Moses. It begins with God calling Jeremiah into service as a prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah, however, is not quite so ready to jump on command. "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, I am only a boy!" But, without missing a beat, God doesn't pull back, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy;' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you!" Or, if I can put God's response in my own words, "That's absurd and I don't buy it. Because, in the end, it's not what YOU can do that matters!"

And, that's exactly what we see in Moses. The passage we read earlier is the beginning of the back and forth between Moses and God – but, it's only the beginning of a dialog that continues well beyond what read. It starts with that first call – Moses at the burning bush and God calling Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But, like Jeremiah, he's not chomping at the bit to take it on. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God replies, "I will be with you." But, that's not enough for Moses.

'But,' Moses continues with his next excuse, 'I don't know who you are. You send me out to the Israelites and their going to ask who sent me, what am I supposed to say?' "I am who I am," God replies (and remember that line, because we're going to come back to it in a few weeks as we head into Lent). God doesn't relent – God presses on with the call for Moses – but Moses just as stubbornly sticks to his excuses. 'Fine, so even if I tell them who you are – even if I go in to proclaim what you tell me to proclaim – they're not going to buy it! They're going to claim that I made everything up.' God doesn't back down. We're into the fourth chapter of Exodus, now, in which God gives him a series of signs. The staff in his hand is turned to a snake and then back to a staff – his hand is covered with leprosy when he places it under his cloak, only to repeat the action and have it restored – he pours water from the river on the ground and it becomes like blood. God gives Moses each of these as a sign to perform to the people so that Moses can convince them of his call.

Moses didn't think he was up to the call – so God promised to be with him. Moses tried to get out of it because he didn't know God's name – God gave him a name to proclaim. Moses tried to avoid the call by pointing out that no one would believe him – God gave him proof. And, then Moses turns around and says, 'You know, that's all well and good, but I don't talk well, so you really should just get someone else!' But, God doesn't back down – he gives him Aaron to be the voice, but never fades from his call for Moses to be the leader. Again and again Moses tried to come up with one excuse after another to get out of what God was calling him to do and, again

and again, one excuse after another, God said, ‘That’s absurd and I don’t buy it. Because, in the end, it’s not what YOU can do that matters!’

Making excuses in life, and making excuses in faith, it’s nothing new. And, sometimes it’s because we don’t want to be bothered, we don’t want to get involved, we don’t want to invest what it would take to follow through on what God might be compelling in our lives. But, sometimes, it’s because we get genuinely overwhelmed by the prospect of trying to do what God is calling us to do in any given moment. Jeremiah was being asked to stand up to persecution from those who would oppose him and to proclaim condemnation upon the people of God due to their idolatrous acts – he had reason to be hesitant. Moses was being called to stand up against a powerful leader and an army of warriors, only to lead his fellow Israelites into wandering and consternation – he had reason to resist. These men weren’t simply being selfish or lazy – they were being called to profound things and genuinely felt overwhelmed by the task that was set before them. And, sometimes, that’s us.

You know, I think we often love to look at that more storied and beautiful call of Isaiah in the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah. We hear the story of Isaiah confronted by the presence of God and overwhelmed by his shortcomings and faults – suddenly terrified at his fate by coming into the presence of God so unworthy. We hear of that six-winged seraph who comes to touch his lips with that lump of coal and to cleanse him of his all his sins. Then we hear of God asking that memorable question, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ And, awed and thankful for the grace and mercy he has received Isaiah proudly exclaims, ‘Here I am, send me!’

It’s a beautiful and moving story and an equally beautiful and moving song that we love to sing, but I think the truth is that the vast majority of us are far more like Moses and Jeremiah. I think the vast majority of us, in the face of God’s more daunting and overwhelming calls in our lives, are far more apt to hear God’s call, embrace Isaiah’s awe and wonder, but follow the lead of Jeremiah and Moses as we proclaim, “Who am I? Send him! Send her!” Only to follow up with every excuse in the book. But, God’s response never fails. ‘That’s absurd and I don’t buy it. Because, in the end, it’s not what YOU can do that matters!’ And, that’s really my point in all of this today.

I included, on the front of our bulletin this morning, that image of the eagle and the quote from the 40th chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy – because I think they are words that speak volumes to the Moses and Jeremiah moments we may encounter in our journeys of faith.

“The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Those who wait for the Lord – those who rely on the Lord for what they need in facing life – shall renew their strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run and not grow tired, walk and never fade. Those who count on God for their needs and shortcomings in life will find, in God, all they ever need. The truth is that we can, and often will, come up with every excuse in the

books. And, we seem to get better and better with the excuses we can muster and the tales we can weave. But, no matter how many excuses we come up with, and no matter how many tales we tell, God's call will never cease. Because, in the face of God's call, only one of two things is true. Either, 1) You just don't really want to be bothered – in which case God doesn't care what excuse you come up with. Or, 2) You genuinely don't feel up to the challenge, in which case God doesn't buy it, because, in the end, it's not what YOU can do, but what God can do THROUGH YOU, that matters.