

Hearing the Call

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had continued teaching high school math and science for my entire career, instead of leaving public education after seven years. Why did I leave a job I enjoyed? Did God want me to be a teacher all my life?

Sometimes I wonder if I wasted my time and talents by working in a Christian bookstore for eighteen years. Did I really need a master's degree in education to work in retail? Did God close the store to force me to finally leave?

Sometimes I wonder if I should have continued my original plan to earn a Master of Divinity with an emphasis on biblical studies. I thought I would combine my education experience with my Bible knowledge to teach somewhere. Didn't that seem to be the perfect use of my various degrees and work experiences?

Sometimes I wonder what kind of pastor I would be if I had gone to seminary in my twenties or thirties instead of celebrating my fiftieth birthday in the middle of my studies. How would my younger self relate to people in the congregation? Would I have put my energy into different areas of ministry than I have as a woman in her fifties and sixties? Would I have been able to serve as a part-time pastor?

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had a spouse and children.

Sometimes I wonder where I'd be if I had listened to the advice of my small group of church friends who were sure I should work with a mission organization in another country immediately after graduating from college.

Sometimes I wonder how the multitude of factors over which I had no control affected my life. I didn't choose where to be born, who my parents were, what their income was, or what my genetic makeup, gender identity, sexual orientation, or skin color are. What would my life journey have been like if any of those were different?

Something I never wonder about is my decision to accept the invitation to be the pastor of Salina Mennonite Church for the past fourteen and a half years. Even during the toughest times of my ministry I've never regretted being in this place with these people at this time in my life.

As my retirement date approaches, sometimes I wonder why I said that 2023 was my last year here. Life would likely be easier for all of us if we weren't facing a time of transition into an unknown future.

Sometimes I wonder if I was hearing a call from God with each life-changing decision during the past fifty years. But I never wonder if God was present during each transition. Even though a different decision at various points along the way would have led me to a different place than I am now, I'm confident that each of the choices I made gave me the life experiences that help me to be the pastor and person I am now. Overall, I'm satisfied with the way things have turned out.

You've probably been wondering how in the world all my wonderings connect with today's scripture from the book of Exodus. Let's consider the story from Exodus and see if it all makes sense.¹

Recall what we read two weeks ago. Shiphrah, Puah, and Moses' mother heard God's call in their daily routines. While delivering babies and nurturing children, they encountered extremely difficult situations that forced them to take risky actions.

In contrast, God's call to Moses required a significant change of circumstance. Of course, his situation had already changed significantly throughout his lifetime. He was born to and raised by a Hebrew mother. He was adopted by an Egyptian princess. The interaction of these multiple identities resulted in a life-altering action made in the heat of the moment.

Reading from Exodus 2: *Years later, when Moses had grown up, he went out to observe his people—the Hebrews—and he witnessed the heavy burden of labor forced upon them. He also witnessed an Egyptian*

¹ This sermon draws from the Week Eight Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Pulpit Fiction Podcast, [Proper 17A \(OT 22\) — Pulpit Fiction](#); and Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.56-81.

beating one of his Hebrew brothers. He looked around to see if anyone was watching but there was no one in sight, so he beat the man just as the man had beaten the Hebrew. Moses ended up killing the Egyptian.

He went out again the next day and saw two of his Hebrew brothers fighting with each other. Moses confronted the offender. “Why are you hitting your friend?” he asked.

“Who made you our prince and judge?” the offender replied. “Are you going to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?”

Fear immediately gripped Moses. “The news of what I did must have spread,” he thought. I must get out of here quickly.

Moses was right. When the news reached Pharaoh, he sought to have Moses killed. But Moses ran away from Pharaoh until he reached the land of Midian. There he sat down beside a well.²

Upon reaching Midian, Moses once again jumped to someone’s defense, this time in a much less drastic manner. Reading on in Exodus 2. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. While Moses was sitting there, resting from his journey, they came to get water from the well in order to fill the troughs with water for their father’s flock. At that moment, a band of shepherds came and forced the priest’s flocks away from the well; but Moses stood up for the young women and even watered their father’s flock for them. The women returned to their father, Jethro. “Why are you back so early today?” their father asked.

“An Egyptian was at the well and he saved us from the bullying of the shepherds,” they replied. “He even drew water from the well and watered the flock for us.”

Jethro questioned his daughters “Where is this man? Why did you leave him at the well? Go find him and invite him over for a meal.”

After experiencing Jethro’s hospitality, Moses agreed to live with him; and eventually Jethro arranged for one of his daughters, Zipporah, to marry Moses. Later Zipporah became pregnant and gave birth to a son; and Moses named the child Gershom because, as he explained, “I have been an outsider in a foreign land.”³

Earlier I talked about how my experiences as a teacher, bookstore manager, and seminary student helped prepare me for my pastoral role. It seems to me that his multiple identities as a humble Hebrew, an Egyptian prince, and a foreigner in Midian helped to prepare Moses for the role he played in God’s story of deliverance for the Hebrew people and their new identity as the children of Israel and eventually as a nation.

When the famous story of Moses and the burning bush occurred, he was tending his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert far from his birthplace with little expectation that his life would be anything more or less than it was at that moment. But when Moses saw a bush that was burning but “not burned up”, he met God.

We find an introduction to this encounter at the end of Exodus 2. Many years later, Egypt’s king died. The Israelites continued to moan because of their bondage, and they cried out to be rescued from their oppression. Their cry for help ascended to God who heard their pleas and remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the situation the people of Israel were in and was moved to take action.⁴

We heard an abridged version of the call of Moses during the storytelling time. Listen again to excerpts from Exodus 3 and 4. Now one day when Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, he guided the flock far away to the other side of the desert and came to a place known as Horeb, where the mountain of God stood. There, the Special Messenger of the Eternal God appeared to Moses in a fiery blaze from within the bush. Moses looked again at the bush as it blazed; but to his amazement, the bush did not burn up in flames. God saw Moses approach the burning bush to observe it more closely and called out to him from within the bush.

“I’m right here,” Moses replied.

“Don’t come any closer,” God instructed. “Take off your sandals and stand barefoot on the ground in My presence, for this ground is holy ground. I am the True God, the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have seen how My people in Egypt are being mistreated. I have heard their groaning when the slave drivers torment and harass them. I have come to rescue them from the oppression of the Egyptians, to lead them from that land where they are slaves and to give them a good land—a wide, open space flowing with

² Adapted from Exodus 2:11-15, *The Voice*.

³ Adapted from Exodus 2:16-22, *The Voice*.

⁴ Adapted from Exodus 2:23-25, *The Voice*.

milk and honey. So go. I'm sending you back to Egypt as My messenger to the Pharaoh. I want you to gather My people—the children of Israel—and bring them out of Egypt."

Moses asked, "Who am I to confront Pharaoh and lead Israel's children out of Egypt?"

God answered, "Do not fear; Moses. I will be with you every step of the way."

But Moses responded. "Let's say I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to rescue you,' and then they reply, 'What is His name?' What should I tell them then?"

God said to Moses "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you should tell the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to rescue you. The Eternal, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is the One who has sent me to you.' This is the name by which all future generations shall remember Me."

Moses continued to protest. "What if they don't trust me? What if they don't listen to a single word I say? They are more likely to reply: 'The Eternal God has not revealed Himself to you.'"

God commanded Moses to throw his staff on the ground. So, Moses threw the staff on the ground, and it was transformed into a snake. Moses quickly jumped back in fear. God instructed Moses to grab it by the tail. Despite his natural fears, Moses reached out and grabbed the snake; and as he held it, it changed back into a shepherd's staff. God said, "This sign is so the people will believe that I, the God of their fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—have revealed Himself to you. Now for the second sign. Put your hand on your chest inside your shirt."

Moses did as God instructed; and when he pulled his hand out, his hand was covered with some disease that made it look as white as snow. Then Moses followed God's next instruction to put his hand back inside his clothes. When he removed his hand from his shirt, it returned to normal like the rest of his skin.

"If they refuse to believe you," God said, "and are not persuaded after you perform the first sign, perhaps they will be after the second sign. But if they refuse to believe you and are not persuaded after you perform the first two signs, then here is a third sign: Take some water from the Nile and pour it out onto the ground. The water you take from the Nile will become blood on the ground."

Moses continued his protests. "Please, Lord, I am not a talented speaker. I have never been good with words. I wasn't when I was younger, and I haven't gotten any better since You revealed Yourself to me. I stutter and stammer. My words get all twisted."

Then God said to him, "Who is it that gives a person a mouth? Who determines whether one person speaks, and another doesn't? Why is it that one person hears, and another doesn't? And why can one person see, and another doesn't? Isn't it because of Me? You know it is. Go now, and I will be there to give you the words to speak; I will tell you what to say."

Moses still wasn't ready to agree to the task. "Please, Lord, I beg you to send Your message through someone else, anyone else."

Then God became angry with Moses. "How about your brother—Aaron? I know he speaks eloquently. I want you to talk to him and put the right words in his mouth. I will guide your mouth and his mouth and instruct you both on what you should do. Take this staff in your hand and use it to perform the signs I have shown you."

With that, Moses ended his protests. He returned to his father-in-law, Jethro, and asked to be released to go back to his Hebrew brothers and sisters in Egypt. Jethro sent him on his way with his blessing. Moses placed his wife and sons on a donkey and started on the long journey back to Egypt. As he walked, he carried God's staff—his shepherd's staff—with him.⁵

As we read on in Exodus during the next few weeks, we'll consider many other interactions between God and Moses, between Moses and the new Pharaoh of Egypt, between Moses and the people, and between the people and God.

For now, I invite you to consider the various times in your life when you've experienced a call from God. We each encounter God in our own way. And these encounters vary throughout time. Sometimes, we're unaware of God's presence and leading until we look back at what led up to where we are now.

⁵ Excerpted and adapted from Exodus 3:1-4:20, *The Voice*.

It's tempting to believe that responding to God's call would be easy if it came in a dramatic fashion. But Moses' experience is not typical of how God calls. In the absence of a "burning bush" type of experience, God's call can go unnoticed because it seems less clear. Many times, God's call comes in ways like the one received by the Hebrew midwives—a situation presents itself, and faithful courage is required.

In whatever way God's call comes, today's text shows Moses wrestling with the implications of what God asks. Moses might have been away from Egypt for 40 years, but he understood the risks involved in returning to confront Pharaoh. It's reassuring to me that Moses didn't immediately say yes to God's instructions. He had a lot of questions for God. It's a good practice to ask questions, even of God.

The first question Moses asked was about his qualifications to go to the Pharaoh. Moses didn't understand the qualifications he possessed. God knew that because Moses had been raised in the Pharaoh's home, he had special knowledge that someone else might not have. He also benefited from what he learned from his Hebrew mother and the experience gained from living as a stranger in Midian.

How can you use your qualifications and experiences to do something important, even risky? What combination of characteristics make you a good fit in a given situation?

Next Moses wanted to know what he should tell the people about the God who was going to set them free. Since he was born a Hebrew but was raised as an Egyptian and spent the first part of his adulthood in Midian, Moses may not have known a lot about God. As he listened to God's answers, Moses began to know God better and began to trust God.

Who do you understand God to be? What has shaped your ideas about God? What experiences have helped you gain trust in God?

The fear that prompted Moses' next question was that the people wouldn't listen to him. It's common to be afraid that no one will listen. It's common not to want to listen to someone else. God gave Moses some signs to help the people decide that they should follow Moses.

In this time of questioning authority, how do you determine who is credible? What sources can you trust to provide the truth? What have you done or what could you do to gain the trust of those you encounter?

Next, Moses argued with God that he just wasn't a good speaker. Moses didn't think he could do what God was asking him to do. God reminded Moses that God made his mouth and would help him speak.

What perceived shortcomings hold you back from doing something you know should be done? How can knowing God created you as you are give you the confidence to do something difficult? When might it be necessary for you to learn or hone a skill?

After Moses listened to all of God's explanations, he concluded that there might be someone better for this job. He stated his opinion to God in very definite terms. Only when God became angry, and said that Aaron would assist him, did Moses reluctantly agree to go to Egypt.

When have you reached the end of your objections and finally done something you felt led to do? How have your failures or perceived shortcomings allowed you to learn and grow as a person?

I hope the biblical story and the questions I've posed help you as you consider each step in your life journey. Keep in mind that hearing and responding to a call from God isn't necessarily equivalent to choosing a vocation. You may hear a call to volunteer or nurture a relationship or spend time alone. Hearing and responding to a call from God isn't necessarily for a lifetime. You may hear different calls during different seasons of your life. You may question this, but I think it's also possible to face a choice between two different life paths and have either choice be part of God's call. That happened to me when I needed to choose between becoming manager of the bookstore or going to seminary. Looking back, I think the decision to wait six more years before attending seminary was a good one. But the other choice could have been a good one as well.

For the older people among us, I wonder what you see when you look back on your life and remember how you've heard the call over the years. I hope you can see that God was with you during the different seasons of your life. For the younger ones among us, I wonder what you see when you look ahead. I hope you feel the freedom to talk about what you're thinking about the near future. I hope the ones asking don't expect you to have your whole life mapped out at age 18 or 25 or 30. I hope all of us listen for God, examine our call, and have the courage to say yes.

May it be so. Amen.