

Ready or Not, Called to Serve

Exodus 3: 1-15

Matthew 16: 21-28

It's a general rule of thumb, or just plain common sense, that you don't go off and try to do something rather challenging without being somewhat prepared. It's a recipe for failure, and may even be damaging and harmful. Thinking something through, garnering the resources, acquiring a bit of experience, even training extensively will all be helpful for a new effort to become successful.

No runner tries a long distance race without having prepared mentally and physically for such endurance. No weight lifter attempts to lift much more than what maximum previous lifts have been. No author who sets out to write a book is typically going to write a best seller after the first try. No preacher starts out preaching memorable sermons – in the good sense, that is – without having already preached many memorable sermons – in the bad sense, that is. And the list can go on and on.

One ends up building a resume of sorts that shows progression from one level of skill and competency to the next. An employer will look at the experience and the education to see if the qualities, positions, and other factors make an individual a good match for the expectations of an open position.

We hopefully do that before we cast our ballots on or before Election Day, assuming you vote – only 16% voted last Tuesday, and only 50-55% or so of registered voters in Marion County will vote in November. Hopefully before voting, people have sized up candidates based on the range, relevance, and quality of their experience, their viewpoints on key issues, and maybe even meet and hear them personally at a candidate forum. Having done such “homework,” an informed choice can be made. But we know people who are lazy, and if they vote, they may vote along a party line indifferently, vote based on how the name sounds, vote for the male or the female, or some other totally arbitrary criteria. It's like taking a test without having studied, and the results show.

I know lots of people who voted for Kelly King for School Board instead of 4 term incumbent Ron Crawford. However, they voted for Kelly King simply because she was **not** Ron Crawford. In fact, they knew next to nothing about King except that she was **not** Ron Crawford.

In reading the stories about how God calls servants of the Kingdom, and how Jesus calls disciples of the Word, we have good reason to wonder what kind of criteria the Lord uses in making these selections. He certainly never checked their resumes. The ones whom God chooses never seem to be the stars of the show. It's like the Emmy for best actor goes to the pizza delivery guy in *Breaking Bad*, or secretary number 4 in *Mad Men*. These aren't the ones who are supposed to be called on the big stage to get the awesome honor and the huge notoriety. Those whom God calls to serve are truly otherwise forgettable characters.

Consider Moses whose story seemed to be over and done. We touched on Pharaoh's orders to kill the male Hebrew babies last week. You may recall Pharaoh's kill-the-babies Plan A was tossed when the midwives couldn't seem to get the job done. Plan B was not too imaginative: throw the male babies into the Nile. We all remember the Hebrew mom putting her Hebrew baby in the basket and floating it down the Nile, to the vicinity where Pharaoh's daughter was bathing. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the basket and the baby, and then Pharaoh's own daughter becomes a subversive and disobeys Pharaoh's orders. She saves the baby, gives the baby to the baby's mother for nursing (unknowingly), and the baby is raised in the royal household with a royal name, Moses.

Then as a young adult, Moses gets in trouble, murdering an oppressive and brutal taskmaster of the Hebrews slaves. Moses flees to Midian and starts a new life. He gets married and they have a son. Pharaoh dies. Done. End of story, right? He lives happily ever after.

No. Now God hears the cries of the Hebrews in their hard slavery in Egypt. God remembered the covenant with Abraham, which suggests that God also forgot about the covenant with Abraham – oops.

Remember, life for Moses is on the quiet track. Hiding out with Jethro's sheep isn't so bad. He's got the wife and son. It's a lot better than being a fugitive hunted in Egypt or rotting in a prison for challenging the status quo. He was out of Egypt and good riddance.

Until one day, he's out with the sheep and he sees a burning bush. A burning bush in that desert heat was actually not so unusual. That it didn't burn up or burn out made it quite a curiosity. So Moses goes over to check it out. God must have been thrilled that Moses had taken the bait. Quickly God chimed up; "Moses! Moses!" Moses replies, "Here I am!" God tells him to come no closer for he is on holy ground and this is the God of your ancestors talking. Moses must have been anxious now.

God relates how he has seen the misery and suffering of his people, the Hebrews, and how the Egyptians harshly oppress them. God intends to rescue them and bring them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land currently occupied by several powerful tribes, but whatever. Truth be told, Moses doesn't really care. He's not interested in some big, new adventure.

Then God drops a bomb; "So now, go" Moses looks around to see who God is talking to. "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

Moses realizes that God is actually issuing this command *to him*. The text has Moses saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring your people out of Egypt?" Moses might also have reminded God, "I am only one man and Pharaoh is emperor of the greatest and most powerful empire in the western world right now. And for another thing, God, you may not realize that I left Egypt in a big hurry and I am in no

hurry to return and get tossed into prison or get executed. I'm sure, God, you can find *someone* else. You are **God** after all."

God isn't budging; "I'll be with you all the time. And when you bring my people out of Egypt, bring them here to worship me."

Moses tries again: "Suppose I go and say to them, 'God has sent me,' and they ask, 'What God? What's his name?' Then what do I say?"

God tells Moses to say, "*I am who I am*; tell them *I am* has sent me."

God and Moses continue this back-and-forth. God has gotten this idea and it falls to Moses to be the one who gets the call to serve, to fulfill this utterly nutty idea that one guy (and his brother) are going to challenge the most powerful ruler on earth, tell this ruler what to do, and succeed. Moses' job is to be faithful. Moses discovers that, despite all of the difficulties, God is faithful to *his* promise. It is simply up to Moses to be faithful to God.

We started talking about qualifications, training, preparation, and a solid resume of experience before taking on a major new task. Here was God coming to Moses, selecting him of all people, for what seems an impossible, suicidal mission. Why? God alone knows why. No one could prepare for this kind of assignment.

What God must have realized, and realized long before Moses knew it about himself, was that Moses had the faith and spirit to complete the mission which would consume the entire rest of his life.

Faith and spirit are far more important than any other qualification in the Lord's work, in advancing the Kingdom. Florence Chadwick was a famous long distance swimmer who swam the English Channel and accomplished many other amazing feats. When she tried the 26 mile journey from Catalina Island to the California coast, she ran into a problem. A dense fog rolled in and obscured the coastline. Chadwick became disoriented and distressed by this. She decided to quit after 16 hours of swimming, only to discover she was only one mile away from shore. Chadwick would make a second attempt at the Catalina Channel, and right on cue, the same kind of dense fog rolled in, only this time, she kept an imaginary image of the shoreline in her mind and forged ahead blindly and completed the landmark swim.

Chadwick wasn't alone. More recently, Diana Nyad who made several attempts to cross the Florida Strait from Cuba to Key West recalled how she was ready to give up when her coach in a rowboat pointed out the brightness on the horizon. Diana said aloud, "The sun is coming up." Her coach replied, "No, those are the lights of Key West." A few more hours and a few more miles and she had completed her swim of the Florida Strait. All of the training and preparation that these women undertook could be undone by a lapse in faith and spirit. Only when they kept a vision for the goal, and could sustain the image and belief of what lies just ahead, were they able to complete their task.

The lack of such faith and spirit, and a failure to sustain the image and belief of what lies just ahead is at the heart of the story of Jesus' sharp rebuke of Peter.

Remember where we left off last week; Peter had just earned praise for his answer to Jesus' question, *Who do **you** say that I am?* Peter answered *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

Then the Lord began describing how he would need to go into Jerusalem, challenge the authorities, and endure their wrath and execution, but also experience the resurrection on the third day.

Peter was feeling pretty confident now and he pulls Jesus to one side. Peter sees himself as something of an authority figure now. He tells Jesus, "Never, Lord. This shall never happen to you." Big mistake.

Jesus jumps all over him. "You're a stumbling block to me." Before, he was nicknamed Rocky, the rock on which the kingdom would be built. Now he's being called stumbling block. That was a fast fall from favor.

Jesus continued, "You don't have in mind the things of God, but the things of mortals." Peter could be forgiven once again. God's ideas are pretty wild and strange. It's most unlikely that Peter could fathom what God was thinking. God's plans are simply mind-blowing.

Jesus chastises Peter for taking his own counsel and speaking by reaction instead of devotion. Peter was being led by mortal, worldly thinking rather than faith and spirit, the qualities that had rewarded him just moments before.

Jesus wants his disciples to know that this is not your typical walk about the Holy Land. Jesus is not a tour guide to all the great sights. Jesus is not your happy faced buddy. Jesus is not simply a wandering teacher and preacher. Jesus is not some revolutionary looking to bring political change. They are not going to be Jesus' lieutenants in the new regime. Jesus says:

Take up [your] cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

God leads his people into his promise. God leads his people to himself. God seeks the servant – Moses or Peter – who will faithfully follow God's lead, whose spirit has the quality to fulfill the mission. If the servant is directed by any other source than God, than by faith and spirit, then the servant can only direct the people *away* from God. Led away from God, the people are lost, the promise is left incomplete, the grace is disregarded and God is estranged from his people. The faith and spirit of the servant are critical elements in why God calls these otherwise unforgettable characters. Their faith and spirit are right.

Our preparation and qualification to serve the Lord and his Kingdom's promise is all about faith and spirit. That's what we need to practice and sustain, those disciplines that will enable to stay focused on the goal God has set for our service. May we be prepared because that call to serve comes whether we're ready or not.