

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 17, 2017**

## **SEND SOMEONE ELSE**

### **Exodus 4:1-13**

Have you ever thought about the difference – that’s putting it mildly – between the response of Moses and the response of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to the call of God in their lives? Isaiah 6 records the prophet’s famous vision of the Lord “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1). After assuring Isaiah that his sins are forgiven, the Lord says: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” To which Isaiah replies: “Here am I. Send me!” (6:8). This was Isaiah’s commission to serve as God’s spokesman to the people of Judah.

Moses, as we know, met the Lord in the burning bush while he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro in the arid wilderness of Midian (Exodus 3). When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, Moses replies: “Here I am” (3:4). Moses then engages God in a dialogue about the mission God has for him, raising several questions and objections to God’s plan to use Moses to deliver the entire nation of Israel (some two million people) from their slavery in Egypt. Finally, when he runs out of questions, Moses says: “Lord, please send someone else to do it” (4:13).

On the one hand, we have Isaiah stepping forward in response to the graciousness of the Lord, saying: “Send me!” On the other, we have Moses saying: “Send somebody else – *anybody else!*” Their responses are only about 180 degrees apart!

Our focus in this series is on Moses, not Isaiah, so it is Moses and his reaction to the Lord’s call that I want to zero in on. As we saw last Sunday, Moses didn’t expect to encounter a bush engulfed in flames but not being burned up when he got up that morning. He didn’t expect to hear a voice speaking to him from the bush. He certainly didn’t expect to have an encounter with the true and living God – the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. To say that he was startled by all this, or to say that he was surprised by the mission God had for him, would be a huge understatement. This was not something he felt prepared for. Not something he felt equipped for. Not by a long shot. But, as Isaiah tells us, the Lord doesn’t think the way we think, and the way we work isn’t the way He works (Isaiah 55:8, *MSG*). God sometimes colors outside the lines of our ways of understanding and doing.

So Moses, when God speaks to him and gives him his mission, comes up with every excuse, every question, every objection he can think of to get God to change His mind. His first objection, as we saw last week, was to complain that he was just not up to the task of leading the people of Israel out of Egypt. In Exodus 3:11, he says to God: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” There was a time, 40 years earlier, when Moses would have been on board without a moment’s hesitation. But that train had long ago left the station. The confidence Moses had had as a young man was long gone. Where once he had been full (too full) of self-confidence, now he was filled with self-doubt. He felt himself totally unqualified for the mission at hand. There was no doubt in his mind that he

was the wrong person for the job. He didn't see how God could possibly use a failure like him.

God, on the other hand, saw that Moses was perfectly suited, perfectly qualified to be the instrument of Israel's deliverance from their oppression in Egypt. What Moses didn't yet understand was that He was dealing with the God of second chances. He specializes in reclaiming, redeeming, and restoring failures to be useful in service to His kingdom. Simon Peter is Exhibit A of God's willingness and ability to use failures. Peter failed spectacularly when he denied Jesus three times after Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus did not give up on him. Instead, following the resurrection, Jesus restored and recommissioned Peter to his ministry as an apostle (John 21:15-19). And Peter became a fearless evangelist and leader in the New Testament church.

We could cite other biblical characters, such as David, Mary Magdalene, the woman caught in adultery, Zaccheus, and John Mark as examples of the mercy and power of God not only to save but to use people in His service who have a record of moral or spiritual failure.

To Moses' objection that he was supremely unqualified for God's mission, the Lord responded: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). The promise of God's presence was what Moses needed. It is God's promise to you and me as well. *God. Is. With. You.* I hope it made a difference in your life this past week to know that, while you don't have a "great, big Bubba" (as we talked about last Sunday) walking beside you or behind you at every moment, you have One greater than Bubba who is with you and who will never, ever leave you to face life with all its twists and turns and heartaches and hardships alone.

The promise of God's loving, gracious, abiding presence should be enough for us. Just as it should have been enough for Moses. But it wasn't. Moses still had plenty of hesitations and objections.

### **WHAT IF?**

So Moses proceeded to engage God in a series of "What if?" scenarios. The first is in Exodus 3:13, where Moses says: "What if I go to the Israelites and tell them You sent me, and they ask me what Your name is. What shall I tell them?" Moses certainly knew about God. He knew some things about God. But he had been raised as an Egyptian, and had spent 40 years in Midian. So his education in the faith of the Jewish people must have had some serious gaps. He was honest enough to admit that he didn't think he knew enough about God to give an adequate answer to the question. So God, rather than seeing this as a reason to disqualify Moses, gave him a direct answer. He revealed His personal name to Moses. In 3:14, we read: "God said to Moses: 'I AM WHO I AM' (Or 'I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.') Tell the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The name "I AM" comes from the Hebrew word for the verb "to be." It is usually indicated by the Hebrew letters YHWH and, with vowels added, spelled, "*Yahweh.*" Because of the Jewish people's ancient (and continuing) reticence to spell or pronounce God's personal name, it became customary to replace *Yahweh* with the word *Adonai*, which means "Lord."

In keeping with this tradition, most English translations of the Bible use the word “LORD” in all capital letters wherever the name *Yahweh* appears in the text. One that is different is *The Message* paraphrase, which uses “GOD” in all caps instead of “LORD.”

The name, “I AM,” reminds us of God’s eternal existence and unchanging nature. He is, as it says in Hebrews 13:8, “the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” Which can – and should – give us comfort, encouragement, and confidence to face the trials and troubles of this life. The I AM, the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, has made Himself known to us. We can know God. Personally. He is *with* us. And He is *for* us, as Paul proclaims so powerfully in Romans 8:31, so who can stand against us? That is the meaning and the power of God’s name.

For the second time, in 3:16, God tells Moses to go (cf. 3:10), this time to gather the leaders of Israel and to tell them what the Lord has said He will do. And, though Pharaoh won’t let the people go unless he is forced to, the Lord assures Moses that he will eventually let them go (3:19-20).

### **WHAT IF? (2)**

But God’s assurances are not enough to overcome Moses’ doubts. So, in 4:1 he asks another “What if?” question: “What if they (the people) don’t believe me? What if they won’t listen to me?”

To this God responds by giving Moses three signs intended to make the most skeptical of the Israelites believe him. The first sign (4:2-5) is Moses’ wooden shepherd’s staff. At God’s command, Moses throws it on the ground, and the staff turns into a snake, which startles Moses (much as it would startle me and, I imagine, you), and he starts to skedaddle, as they say. Then the Lord tells him to reach out and grab the snake by the tail. That is ordinarily not good advice. The conventional wisdom is that if you have to do it, you should always grab a snake by the head to prevent the snake from biting you. Picking up a snake by the tail is not usually recommended. But if God appears to you in a burning bush (or any other miraculous way) and tells you to do it, you can’t go wrong by doing what God says. So, Moses grabs the snake by the tail and it turns into a staff again.

The second sign God gives Moses (4:6-7) is making Moses’ hand diseased with a skin disease of some kind, and then healing it.

If the first two signs are not enough to prompt the people to believe, God gives Moses a third sign to convince them (4:8-9). He tells Moses to take water from the Nile River and to pour it out on the ground. When it hits the ground, the water will turn to blood. This, of course, anticipates the first of the plagues that struck Egypt, when Moses turned the water of the Nile into blood in Exodus 7.

Through these signs, through these demonstrations of His power, the Lord assures Moses that the people of Israel *will* believe him and *will* listen to him. But Moses still has not run out of objections.

## **I'M NOT A GOOD SPEAKER**

He pleads his final excuse in verse 10, complaining that he has never been good with words. He is not a charismatic speaker, he says, and he gets tongue-tied easily. Surely that will disqualify him for the mission on which God is planning to send him. Surely there must be someone better, someone better qualified, that God can use.

But what does the Lord say to Moses? “Who do you think made the human mouth anyway? Isn't it I, the Lord? Now go!” (This is the third time God has now told Moses to get going.) Then He says: “I will be right there with you. I will help you speak. I will give you the words to say” (4:11-12).

## **HOW OFTEN?**

Let's pause right here for a moment. How often, I wonder, are we – you and I – like Moses in this regard? How often do we try to hide behind this same excuse, thinking that our lack of eloquence (or what we perceive as the shortcomings in our communication skills) excuses us from serving the Lord in ways that may stretch us beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone? How often do we shrink back from telling someone about Jesus and the difference He has made in our lives? How often do we hesitate or decline an opportunity to give a verbal witness to the gospel because we're afraid we'll mess it up or get it wrong? Can we not believe that God will be with us – that He *is* with us – and that He will give us the particular words we need at the particular time we need them, just as He promised to do for Moses? Can we not trust God to do that? Will we? Will you?

You see, your eloquence or lack of it (or my eloquence or lack of it) is not the issue just as Moses' eloquence or lack of it was not the issue. The issue is one of trusting God. The issue is one of believing God. The issue is one of taking God at His word. The issue is one of believing *and* acting on your belief. The issue is one of trust *and* obedience. The issue is one of believing *and* doing.

You must believe that God can and will give you the words you need to speak of Him to others. I must believe it. Each of us must believe that God can and will use us, our communication skills or lack thereof notwithstanding, to share the good news of His grace and love with the people around us who need to hear it. You and I must believe that God can and will use our church family – the Faith Church family – to share the good news with our neighbors in Kingstowne and beyond.

That is why God put us here. God did not put us here to have a nice little church where we find a haven from the evils of the world, where everybody feels comfortable, where we enjoy being together, and we feel inspired and refreshed by our time of worship each week. These are all good things, but they do not adequately answer the question of why God has put our church here in this community at this time in history. God has put us here to shine the light of His love and truth into the darkness and brokenness of this world. God has put us here to share with our community the life-transforming message of the gospel that has changed our lives. God has put us here to actively invest ourselves – time, energy, abilities, gifts, and

resources – in relationships and ministries to make Jesus known and to invite our unbelieving neighbors to trust Him, to love, and to follow Him as fully-devoted disciples.

This is our mission. It is our calling as an intergenerational, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, Christ-centered fellowship of believers in Kingstowne, Virginia.

### **HOW TO GUARANTEE FAILURE**

Do you want to know how to guarantee that we will never impact our community with the gospel? Do you want to know how to guarantee that we will never see many of our unbelieving neighbors come to faith in Christ and become His followers? Do you want to know how to guarantee that we will fail to fulfill our God-appointed mission?

It is really simple. All you have to do is follow the example of Moses in these verses in Exodus 4. Just take yourself out of the action and put yourself on the sidelines – be content to be a spectator (and maybe a critic, too) – because you don't feel gifted enough or skilled enough for God to use you. That's all you have to do. Or, just tell God, as Moses does in verse 13, to “send someone else to do it.” *Anyone* else. Anyone but you.

If you read on in Exodus 4, you will see that God was not pleased with Moses' stubborn resistance to His call. Verse 14 says that “the Lord's anger burned against Moses.” His refusal to accept God's call made God angry. Anger, you know, is not the dominant attribute of God's character. Anger *is* one quality of God's character. It is not inconsistent with His attributes of love and mercy and patience and kindness. God's anger is always a righteous anger. It is a holy anger. But God is not typically in a bad mood. He doesn't go around looking for opportunities to lash out in anger. The caricature of an angry God always on the lookout for someone to punish is just that: a caricature. It is not an accurate picture of what God is really like.

But He does and He will get angry when righteous anger is appropriate. And He got angry with Moses. Moses deserved it. But even though God got angry with Moses, He didn't give up on Moses. He didn't let Moses off the hook. But He did appoint Moses' brother Aaron to be Moses' spokesman, which seems to have alleviated at least some of Moses' fear, because the next thing you know as you read on in Exodus 4, Moses returns to Jethro his father-in-law, collects his wife and sons, and begins the journey back to Egypt.

I believe Moses really wanted to serve God. I believe he really wanted to be used by God. But I believe Moses wanted to define the terms of service. He wanted to choose the way(s) he would serve God.

Aren't we like that? Have you ever said: “Lord, I'll go wherever You want me to go, as long as You don't send me to ...” (some particular place to which you know you don't want to go)? Or: “Lord, I'll serve You in any way You want, as long as You don't ask me to ...” (serve in a particular way or ministry you don't like, or with a particular person who rubs you the wrong way)?

Dangerous things to pray, dangerous things to say to God, or even to think. Pleading with God to “send someone else” was not one of Moses’ best moments.

If God asks you to get involved in a particular ministry in the church or the community, if the Lord calls you to serve as an elder or deacon, as a teacher or youth leader, as a small group leader or some other ministry leader, please don’t say: “Send someone else.” If the Lord is calling you, it is because He wants to use *you*. Don’t try to hand off your responsibility to give a verbal witness or to share the gospel to someone else. Let God use you. Ask Him – and trust Him – to give you not only the opportunity to tell others about Him, but also to be with your mouth and to give you the words to speak when you need them. As the Lord was with Moses when he went back to Egypt and then led the people of Israel to freedom, so He will be with you and me. We just need to really believe it. And then act on it.

God is faithful. He will give us the grace and courage and strength we need just when we need it. And the words we need, too. Which is not to say that doing what God calls us to do is always easy.

### **WHEN WE NEED IT**

John Lennox is an emeritus professor of mathematics at Oxford University who happens to be a Christian. I should probably say he is a Christian first of all who happens to be an emeritus professor of mathematics at Oxford. In his book *Against the Flow*, he writes about meeting a Russian Christian who spent years in a Siberian labor camp for the crime of teaching his children about the Bible:

“He described to me that he had seen things that no man should ever have to see. I listened, thinking how little I really knew about life, and wondering how I would have fared under his circumstances. As if he had read my thoughts, he suddenly said: ‘You couldn’t cope with that, could you?’ Embarrassed, I stumbled out something like: ‘No, I am sure you are right.’ He then grinned and said: ‘Neither could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations, but real ones. Like you, I couldn’t imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once there I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus promised His disciples when He was preparing them for ... persecution.’” (Lennox, *Against the Flow*, 147).

Not theoretical situations but real ones. Moses would discover this truth in his experience. And so will we, as we trust God for His unfailing presence and the words and grace and wisdom and courage for every moment.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.