

Exodus 3:1-12

Belonging and Purpose

The Times-Reporter of New Philadelphia, Ohio, reported in September 1985 a celebration at a New Orleans municipal pool. The party around the pool was held to celebrate the first summer in memory without a drowning at any New Orleans city pool. In honor of the occasion, two hundred people gathered, including one hundred certified lifeguards.

As the party was breaking up and the four lifeguards on duty began to clear the pool, they found a fully dressed body in the deep end. They tried to revive Jerome Moody, thirty-one, but it was too late. He had drowned surrounded by lifeguards celebrating their successful season.

[One may] wonder how many visitors and strangers are among us drowning in loneliness, hurt, and doubt, while we, who could help them, don't realize it.¹

It seems that often we are oblivious, not paying attention to, or simply ignoring what is going on around us. This past year and a half, it has been pretty easy to tune out to what was outside of our households because we had such limited ability to engage anyone or anything. Still there has been much discussion as to the struggle many have experienced as the pandemic took hold. On Friday evening one of the news stories was about how the mental health of children and youth has been adversely affected by the months of isolation and lack of interaction with friends, family, learning situations and extra-curricular activities.

I know from talking to many of the seniors in our congregation and elsewhere that not being allowed to leave their rooms for meals and social activities even within their own buildings left them feeling isolated and lonely with neither family nor friends able to take away the burden with a hug. Phone calls and computer screens became lifelines.

Our church and many others felt the loss of community as we closed for in person worship and the work and ministry that we have done together for decades was ordered shut-down as a means to stop the spread of the virus. For our community members around the church and elsewhere in the city that have no means and no housing the challenges became increasingly difficult.

¹ Larson, Craig Brian. *Leadership Journal. 750 Engaging Illustrations for Preacher, Teachers, and Writers*. Baker Books. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1993, 1996, 1998. 2002. Page 374.

Now all of this has been necessary to one degree or another in order to keep each other safe from the threat of serious illness and death, but it certainly came with a cost. One of the burdens I personally felt was how restriction limited our ability to touch the lives of others. As Christians we are wired for community. One cannot see themselves as Christian and deny the need for community. Our communities of faith are a source of connection and purpose or at least they should be. Churches should be where all can find a place of love and belonging.

So, though it is a place of belonging, it is also a place of discomfort and change. If the church is a place where all should find a welcome it will mean being willing to be shaped and transformed constantly as each person who finds a place here brings new ideas from their lived experience, from their cultures, history, work, education, family, status in the community or lack thereof.

Christ was known for how he reached out to the stranger, the lost, the sick, those on the margins of the community and cared for them when others ignored them. Christian community was formed in ever changing environments and cities with different ethnicities and unique circumstances. And yet somehow, we have become change adverse and really comfortable with our traditions, expectations of what worship should look like and who we want in our pews. We have become complacent in our desire to seek out those who are in need, welcome them, and adapt to the changing climate and experiences of those who are struggling in mind, body, and spirit or simply looking for a place to belong.

One of the most memorable, iconic, and important figures of the Old Testament was Moses. Moses shouldn't have even survived. He was born into a time when Hebrew babies were being killed and yet he survived through the cunning of women in his life. Most astoundingly he was raised by Pharaoh's daughter. This was a guy who most certainly could have remained in the comfort of his own home and yet observed what was happening to the people and ended up exiled for a time in fear for his life. This is a very curtailed description of what happened to get us to the point of Moses tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro when he sees this burning bush. The bush that was on fire but not consumed by the fire. Holy ground from which God choose to call on Moses, this disgraced Hebrew man, Egyptian prince, and now shepherd. God called him to work with God in freeing people from slavery.

Moses wasn't too keen on the project. He protested, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt." This won't be Moses' only objections or complaint in times to come, but it was his first. God responded, "I will be with you."

Just like we are not to compare ourselves with Jesus, we are not Moses either. For most of us, God's voice is more like a thought in our minds, or a strong sense of what one should be doing. but even so God is still the God of our ancestors. God has always been a part of human history. Sometimes God's presence has seemed silent, but God

has always been with people and God is still using human agency to work in the world. This is the calling to which you and I, and the church in general has been summoned.

We can ignore, protest that we are not enough, that we don't have the words, the means, the money, the time yet God still says, I will be with you. We don't have a mountain to worship at, but we have our churches as a sign that we are the community of faith called together to show God's love, compassion, and presence to those who are in fear, who are in bondage because of debt, loneliness, illness, whose relationships are challenging or downright dangerous. Those who are homeless, those who don't have anyone to call family, those whose life experience is vastly different from our own.

These interactions will only broaden our understanding of the world around us and when we look for what God is already up to in our midst then we will also be filled with awe and wonder, but also frustration and challenge as we work to comprehend our own experience and walk along side those who are in need.

When speaking of need, we must not limit that word. People can be in poverty of mind, body, and spirit. There are those who have limited access to things that many of us don't even consider a problem because we have resources and or people to help.

The congregation of St. Andrew's here in Thunder Bay is finding ourselves in a surprising and wonderful place as we come to this fall of 2021. We have an opportunity to see how God may be sending us to bring about justice for the oppressed, life to our congregation and those whose lives we intersect with, and how we might find like minded individuals or organizations to more fully bring about God's kingdom on earth right now.

Engaging together we may find ourselves on an adventure of faith and future that we could not have anticipated. God has not stopped calling people to participate in God's life-giving work in the world. This is possible here in our church with this building. It is possible in your own life. It is exciting, it should be engaging, and it should be transforming of our ministry and our lives.

May you eagerly seek God working in and through you. Even if you are a little or a lot afraid of what that may mean for your life, know that you are in good company. Even Moses had fear and trepidation. If you follow his life through you will see how the faith of one person had an effect on all those around him, it changed a people, and even though he felt inadequate, fearful, and doubted, God was pleased to work through this man and God is pleased to love you and love others through you and all people of faith.

We do it together as we learn, worship, sing, pray, and love in community. Where all can and should find meaning and purpose for their lives, and in a place where all can know they are worthy of belonging. Where all are lovingly surrounded, remembered, and known. Amen.