

RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD  
Excuses, Excuses  
Exodus 3:1-11 January 17, 2010

Here's a little known addition to one of the more familiar stories of our faith.

And the Lord said unto Noah: "Where is the ark which I commanded thee to build?"

And Noah said unto the Lord: "Verily, I have had three carpenters off ill. The gopherwood supplier hath let me down—yea, even though the gopherwood hath been on order for nigh upon twelve months. What can I do, O Lord?"

And the Lord said unto Noah: "I want that ark finished even after 7 days and 7 nights."

And Noah said, "It will be so."

And it was not so. And the Lord said unto Noah: "What seemeth to be the trouble this time?"

And Noah said unto the Lord: "Mine subcontractor hath gone bankrupt. The pitch which Thou commandest me to put on the outside and on the inside of the ark hath not arrived. The plumber hath gone on strike. Shem, my son who helpeth me on the ark side of the business, hath formed a pop group with his brothers Ham, and Japheth. Lord, I am undone."

And the Lord grew angry and said: "And what about the animals, the male and female of every sort that I ordered to come unto thee to keep their seed alive upon the face of the earth?"

And Noah said, "They have been delivered unto the wrong address but should arrive on Friday."

And the Lord said: "How about the unicorns?"

And Noah wrung his hands and wept, saying "Lord, unicorns are a discontinued line; thou canst not get them for love nor money. Lord, Lord, thou knowest how it is."

And the Lord shook His head and said, "Noah, my son, I knowest. Why else dost thou think I have caused a flood to descend upon the earth." (James L. Hewett, ed., Illustrations Unlimited. "The Story of Noah Retold." pg. 181-182).

Excuses, excuses. We have all used them at one time or another when we have a task that needs to be done, a deadline that needs to be met.

Now I'm not talking about those things that are realistic, justified roadblocks that can't be helped. Whenever you live and work in community and have to rely on other people, there will be bumps in the road that will have to be maneuvered around, detours that will have to be made. Things happen in life that are unavoidable, and we have to learn to be flexible with deadlines and creative with problem-solving.

The problems come when we deliberately, intentionally don't want to do something, and we make up reasons, rationales, justifications for NOT following through.

We've all used excuses at some point in our lives, like the high school sophomore who had been assigned a term paper. His teacher had observed that Gene had not been working steadily on his paper as others had in the class. So on the day of reckoning when the paper was due, the teacher was ready for some kind of excuse. When the teacher went to collect the assignment from Gene, he said, "My dog ate it." The teacher, who had heard them all, gave Gene a hard stare of disbelief. "Come on now, you can do better than that!" But Gene insisted. "It's true. I had to force feed him, but he really did eat it!" (ibid. pg. 182)

Excuses, excuses. We use them in all aspects of our lives, from why we are home late from work, to why we don't want to go to a party on the day of a big football game, to even why we break up from some of our relationships.

Perhaps because of the work I do and the career into which I've been called, I am especially aware that there are a lot of excuses used about why people don't go to church on Sunday mornings. You've all heard them, and the excuses are getting more and more numerous, as we learned yesterday at the North Texas Area Leadership meeting where we heard statistics that show that although 90% of Americans say they are spiritual, less than 30% attend worship on a regular basis.

Why? Well there are a myriad of reasons—some justified. But most are just plain excuses made out ignorance.

One minister, in frustration, wrote a satirical op. ed. piece for his local newspaper entitled "The Top 12 reasons I stopped attending athletic events."

1. Every time I went, they asked me for money.
2. The people with whom I had to sit didn't seem very friendly.
3. The seats were too hard and not comfortable
4. The coach never came to call on me.
5. The referee made a decision with which I could not agree.
6. I was sitting with some hypocrites—they only show up to a game once or twice a year to be seen, and the way they act—they're not true fans anyway.
7. Some games went into overtime, and I was late getting home.
8. The band played some numbers that I had never heard before.
9. The games are scheduled on my one day to rest at home.
10. My parents took me to too many games when I was growing up.
11. Since I read a book on sports, I feel that I know more than the coaches anyhow.
12. I don't want to take my children because I want them to choose for themselves what sport they like best. (Ibid. pg. 91)

Ouch! And yet haven't we heard them all before from our friends and family members who don't go to church?

While we may be able to get away with making excuses with one another, when it comes to a request that God makes of us, we may run, but we can't hide. Many people have tried in the past—good people who thought their excuses were good enough. But God sees behind and beyond our rationales and our justifications, and calls us to be the people we were created to be in the Divine image.

Our scripture that was read this morning begins a conversation that Moses had with the Lord when God called upon him to do something of grave importance. <sup>9-10</sup> "The Israelite cry for help has come to me, and I've seen for myself how cruelly they're being treated by the Egyptians. It's time for you to go back: I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt."

<sup>11</sup> Moses answered God, "But why me? What makes you think that I could ever go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

<sup>12</sup> "I'll be with you," God said. "And this will be the proof that I am the one who sent you: When you have brought my people out of Egypt, you will worship God right here at this very mountain."

<sup>13</sup> Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What do I tell them?"

<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you....'"

<sup>4:1</sup> Moses objected, "They won't trust me. They won't listen to a word I say. They're going to say, 'GOD? Appear to him? Hardly!'"

<sup>2</sup> So GOD said, "What's that in your hand?" "A staff."

<sup>3</sup> "Throw it on the ground." He threw it. It became a snake; Moses jumped back—fast!

<sup>4-5</sup> GOD said to Moses, "Reach out and grab it by the tail." He reached out and grabbed it—and he was holding his staff again. "That's so they will trust that GOD appeared to you, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

<sup>6</sup> GOD then said, "Put your hand inside your shirt." He slipped his hand under his shirt, then took it out. His hand had turned leprous, like snow.

<sup>7</sup> He said, "Put your hand back under your shirt." He did it, then took it back out—as healthy as before.

<sup>8-9</sup> "So if they don't trust you and aren't convinced by the first sign, the second sign should do it. But if it doesn't, if even after these two signs they don't trust you and listen to your message, take some water out of the Nile and pour it out on the dry land; the Nile water that you pour out will turn to blood when it hits the ground."

<sup>10</sup> Moses raised another objection to GOD: "Master, please, I don't talk well. I've never been good with words, neither before nor after you spoke to me. I stutter and stammer."

<sup>11-12</sup> GOD said, "And who do you think made the human mouth? And who makes some mute, some deaf, some sighted, some blind? Isn't it I, GOD? So, get going. I'll be right there with you—with your mouth! I'll be right there to teach you what to say."

<sup>13</sup> He said, "Oh, Master, please! Send somebody else!"

<sup>14-17</sup> GOD got angry with Moses: "Don't you have a brother, Aaron the Levite? He's good with words, I know he is. He speaks very well. In fact, at this very moment he's on his way to meet you. When he sees you he's going to be glad. You'll speak to him and tell him what to say. I'll be right there with you as you speak and with him as he speaks, teaching you step by step." (The Message)

Moses tried every excuse in the book, but the Lord had an answer for them. When God has something for us to do, God doesn't broach excuses.

So what does God have in store for us to do? What are those things that God wants us to do and be that, if we try to make excuses, will not hold water when we meet our maker face to face?

Jesus taught us those things fairly clearly during his walk on earth.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. You shall love your enemies."

And, in the Hebrew scriptures we hear from the book of Micah, when the people question: What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

There are no excuses that will fly with the Lord God Almighty when it comes to these commands. We might try---'Lord, our neighbor was a clod. Lord, our enemy was a violent infidel. Lord, I got busy with the many tasks of earthly living and didn't have time for you."

But friends, the Lord our God is not going to let us get away with trying to excuse ourselves. When God gives a command, when God sets out a task for us, we have a choice—either we do it, or not. No excuses, and live with the consequences.

To be honest, what God wants us to do is not easy. To live counter-culturally in our world, to live a radically compassionate and generous lifestyle, to turn the

other cheek—that's not an easy road. We may flounder for ways out, search for loopholes to get around them. God's way is difficult, and many times requires sacrifices that we would rather not give. We would not be human if we, like Moses, didn't search for excuses that would keep us in comfort, and especially protect us from this world's danger.

And yet, when God calls us, when God has a purpose for us in this world to bring about the Divine Realm no matter whether we think we have the ability or not, there are no excuses that work.

This weekend we are observing a national holiday remembering the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He has been called a modern day Moses who, was called by God to free his people from systemic racism and societal violence.

As I prepared for this sermon, I wondered if Dr. King ever tried to make excuses to God, to ask that the particular cup out of which he had been asked to drink would pass from him.

In his book The Strength to Love, Dr. King confessed, "The first 24 years of my life were years packed with fulfillment. I had no basic problems or burdens. Because of concerned and loving parents who provided for my every need, I sallied through high school, college, theological school, and graduate school without interruption. It was not until I became a part of the leadership of the Montgomery bus protest that I was actually confronted with the trials of life. Almost immediately after the protest had been undertaken, we began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters in our home. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased day after day. At first I took them in stride, feeling that they were the work of a few hot heads who would become discouraged after they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I realized that many of the threats were in earnest. I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

"After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep and I was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, N-word, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head I my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left."

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." Almost at once, my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I know now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life." (James Washington, ed., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Strength to Love." 1986. pgs. 508-509)

Many of us in this room were alive when Dr. King put aside whatever understandably human excuses he might have made to avoid the work God had called him to do in this world. All of us in this room are the recipients of his vital and strong faith that changed the world for the better.

Friends, we, too, have all been called to do God's work in this world. No one can say, "It's the Minister's job," or "I'm not good enough," or "There are enough other people out there doing the work that I'm not needed."

We have all been called by the Master. We have all heard the voice of God, if not from a burning bush, then from God Incarnate who walked this earth and speaks to us still—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

No excuses.