

“What is That in Your Hand?

Exodus 3:1-4:17

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January 22, 2012

One day, a father who had to be away from home for a while left his two sons some specific work instructions. When the father returned home he found the task still undone. So he gathered his sons and questioned them. He asked the first son, “What have you been doing while I’ve been away?” “Nothing, sir” his son replied. So he turned to his other son and said “Well, what have you been doing?” “Helping him, sir.”

There’s a Peanuts strip where, after striking out, Lucy walks away with a scowl on her face, muttering: "This bat is no good! It's too light! That ball they're using is no good either! How can anybody hit when the sun is so bright? I bat better when it's cloudy! It's too dusty out there, too! I can't hit well when the wind is blowing! That bat I was using is too short! It's hard to see the ball today! You can't hit a ball when the bat is too thin!" In the final frame, you simply see Charlie Brown saying: “Good grief!”

Excuses, excuses, excuses. If there’s one thing we’re really good at, it’s making excuses. The dog ate my homework. My alarm didn’t go off. I didn’t have time. I thought you were taking care of it.

One church decided to have a special “No Excuse Sunday.” It was an attempt to get everyone to attend Sunday school and church. To accomplish this, they told their parishioners that:

- Cots will be placed in the foyer for those who say, "Sunday is my only day to sleep in."
- Visene will be available for those who have red eyes from staying up too late on Saturday night.
- We will have steel helmets for those who say, "The roof will cave in if I ever come to Sunday school and church."
- Blankets will be furnished for those who say, "The church is too cold," and fans for those who think it is too hot.
- We will have hearing aids for those who say, "The pastor speaks too softly," and cotton for those who say the pastor preaches too loudly.
- Score cards will be available for those who wish to list all of the hypocrites present.
- Some relatives will be in attendance for those who like to go visiting on Sundays.
- There will be TV dinners for those who can't go to church and cook dinner the same day.
- One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to see God in nature.
- Finally, the sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who have never seen the church without them.¹

The list of excuses we make in life could go on and on. We all have our own excuses for not following through on our good intentions, not living up to the challenge of discipleship. How about these excuses...see if any of them sound familiar: I’m nobody. I don’t know enough about

¹ Animating Illustrations from "No Excuses", www.homileticsonline.com, accessed 1/21/12.

God. I might fail. I don't have what it takes. I'm not that articulate. Someone else could do it better. If you find yourself making any of these excuses, you're in good company. Every one of those excuses was used by Moses in this morning's scripture lesson.

It's a well-known story: God speaking to Moses from the burning bush. God calls out to Moses, saying "I have heard the cries of my people, I see their misery and I know their suffering. I will deliver them from the Egyptians and bring them into a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So, Moses, I am going to send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

What follows is a back and forth between God and Moses about this call upon Moses' life. Moses' first response is, "Me?!?! Why me? Who am I to do such a thing?" Excuse number one: I'm nobody.

After God says that God will be there to support him, Moses says, "But God, I don't know your name. If I actually go and tell the Israelites I've been sent to do this thing, I won't be able to tell them who sent me!" Excuse number two: I don't know enough about God.

That's when God tells Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them, I AM has sent you."

Moses then goes on to say, "What if the Israelites don't believe me or listen to me? What if they say, 'No, the Lord didn't really appear to you?'" Excuse number three: I might fail.

God responds with the question we're considering today. God says, "What is that in your hand? I will use your staff to demonstrate to people that I have appeared to you."

As the story continues, Moses gives a couple of additional excuses, saying, "I've never been eloquent. I don't speak real good" to which God replies, "I will teach you what to say." So we have excuse number four: I don't have what it takes.

Finally, after this entire dialogue with four different excuses from Moses and four different assurances that God will support and guide him, Moses desperately says, "Please send someone else!" God then gives him Aaron who will speak on his behalf to the people.

Excuses, excuses, excuses. I'm nobody. I don't know enough about God. I might fail. I don't have what it takes. We all have our own excuses for not following through on our good intentions, not living up to the challenge of discipleship. The good news found in the scripture lesson today is that God is able to work with and through us despite any excuse we can fashion. While we're making excuses or complaining about why we can't do something, God is patiently waiting to show us how we're actually already quite capable of doing anything – with God's support and guidance, that is.

In the midst of his litany of excuses, God asks Moses, "What is that in your hand?" God used the simple stick that Moses had in his hand to liberate a nation. The lesson in this is that when we make available to God whatever we are holding in our hands, we will always be astounded by

what God can do with it. God wants to use us to change the world for the better, and God is capable of using whatever we already have in our hand to make that change happen.

So what is in your hand right now?

The temptation is to be like Moses and think that we don't have anything to offer. The good news is that nothing could be farther from the truth. All of us have something to offer.

First, and probably most obvious, is the fact that we all have unique gifts and abilities. What are you good at? What makes you feel great when you do it? Maybe it's your work, or your computer skills, or your leadership ability, or your financial knowledge, or your physical ability, or your way with people, or your listening skills, or your compassion, or your musical talent, or your baking, or your ability to drive. God is able to use anything we've got for the sake of the common good. We need to understand and to claim what we do well and what gives us energy and we need to invest whatever that is in God's work of healing our broken world.

Even if we think our gift is insignificant, we can remember the staff that Moses had in his hand and how it redeemed a people. No gift, talent, or ability is too small. God can and will use anything we've got.

God's question "What is that in your hand?" also reminds us that we already possess what God wants to use to bless others. We don't need anything new, we just need to name and claim what we've already got in our hand, and offer it over to God's use. Moses already had his staff, he already had his brother Aaron, and he already had his experience with God. He just needed to give those gifts over to God and get over his sense of inability or insignificance. When we begin to use whatever we have in our hand with courage and compassion, we can begin to contribute toward the building of the Kingdom of God.

Another thing we have that can be used in the service of God is our life experience. Everyone's life experience is different, and everyone's life experience is useful. We have all learned lessons in life – some the hard way! Our life experiences include those lessons that we've learned, the successes and the failures we've had, and also the suffering and pain we've endured. I can't tell you how much ministry I've seen done as a result of the experiences that people have had. When we've already walked through a valley or climbed a mountaintop, we are so much more able and motivated to support others who are travelling that same journey.

Going back to our scripture lesson, we should remember the life experience Moses had. He grew up in Pharaoh's household, which meant he probably had a good education and a good understanding of how things went around Pharaoh. Just imagine how helpful that would have been in representing the Israelites in front of Pharaoh!

We also know that Moses spent forty years in the desert as a shepherd. This was life experience he had before he led the Israelites through the desert for forty years. Think he learned some

skills while living in the desert as a shepherd that enabled him to lead the Israelites through their desert wanderings?

Like Moses, we also have life experiences that God can use. They are part of what we already have in our hands.

Sometimes our own insufficiency is what God finds the most useful about us. While he was a seminarian, a pastor and writer by the name of James Moore took a course in clinical pastoral education. One afternoon the head nurse took him aside and told him that a patient, Mrs. Davis, was in dire need of pastoral counseling. She was facing serious brain surgery the next morning with the double liabilities of poor physical condition and a soured, self-pitying spirit. Her chances of survival did not look good.

Overawed by the life-and-death responsibility his pastoral ability seemed to carry, young Moore decided to let Mrs. Davis do all the talking and serve as an “active listening” sound-board for her fears and anxieties. Unfortunately this plan was squelched when, at the last minute, Moore was told Mrs. Davis was not allowed to speak. In a panic, this young seminarian bumbled into the desperately ill woman's room, accidentally banging the door into the wall. He then lurched forward into the room and jarred the poor woman by kicking her bed. Mortified, he then launched into a stuttering, stammering series of platitudes and prayers, saying all the wrong things and feeling he had utterly failed to reach the woman's fears. Horrified at his inadequacy, Moore left quickly.

A few days later, Moore was amazed to find Mrs. Davis recovering nicely and in remarkably good spirits. Even more incredibly this patient praised him and credited him with practically saving her life. “But I don't understand. I felt so terrible; I was so ashamed. I did everything wrong,” Moore moaned. “That's just it,” she replied. “I felt so sorry for you! It was the first time I had felt anything but self-pity for months. That little spark of compassion ignited in me the will to live! And the doctors tell me it made all the difference.”² You see, God can use even our inadequacy when we follow God's call.

Friends, God wants to use us to bring about God's kingdom on earth. God is asking us today, “What is that in your hand?” It's an invitation to bring whatever we have to God, knowing that God can, and God will, use whatever we bring – our talents, gifts and abilities, our life experiences, even our iniquity. The invitation to Christian discipleship this morning is to offer whatever resources we already have in our hands to bring hope and healing to a hurting world.

Let's get honest with ourselves about the excuses we use to avoid this invitation. Let's be willing to name and claim our unique gifts, talents, abilities, and life experiences and offer them to God's use. Let us live as people who know and understand that God has already given us what we need, and what God needs, for us to partner with God in God's healing mission in the world. Let us answer that great calling today and always. Amen.

² James W. Moore, “Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) 96-98.