

"A Reluctant Faith - Moses"
Sermon Series on *The Hall of Faith*
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(Ex. 3:1-10; 4:1-5)

Introduction.

Have you ever been reluctant to do something? There have been times in my life when that's been the case for me. I remember one time when I was in the third grade and I played Pee Wee football at the YMCA. I was the running back on my elementary school team, and I liked being involved in just about every play and trying to score a touchdown. It was fun.

However, one day we were scheduled to play the team from a rival school – E. Rivers Elementary School in Atlanta where I grew up. And they had a kid on their team named Nat Cherry. Nat was big, and he was mean. He played nose guard, and everyone on our team was afraid of him, including me. On the first play from scrimmage the quarterback handed me the ball. When I saw Nat Cherry coming at me with a look of ill intent in his eyes, I gave the ball back to the quarterback. My momma didn't raise a fool! And I was reluctant to get hit by Nat Cherry.

Maybe you've been reluctant to do something in your life, and I suspect that is especially true if it involved a spiritual matter? Have you ever procrastinated when it comes to your growth in Christ? You say to yourself, "I'm going to start reading the Bible on a regular basis and have a daily time for reflection and prayer," but it hasn't happened yet. Or you think, "One day I'll muster up the courage to share my faith with a classmate, my co-worker, or my neighbor, but not yet." Maybe you've always wanted to serve as a volunteer at a homeless shelter, or tutor a child at Cook Elementary School, or go on a mission trip, but you've never gotten around to actually signing up. Sometimes we're reluctant to do what God wants you to do.

This morning we read about a person who was like that. It's easy for us to think that Moses was a strong person of faith and that he had a bold commitment to God. After all, he went to Pharaoh and demanded that the king of Egypt let the Hebrew slaves go. In addition, Moses led the people of Israel through the wilderness, and he was used by God to deliver the Ten Commandments. Moses was a remarkable spiritual leader, and he ended up in God's Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11. But he didn't start out that way, and Moses was one of the most reluctant leaders you could ever meet. Let's look at how things began for him when God first called Moses and gave him a divine assignment.

Travel with me in your mind's eye to the land of Palestine. It is a rugged, barren landscape in the wilderness of Midian. There we see a man who 40 years earlier had fled Egypt for fear of his life. He had killed an Egyptian when he found the man beating a Hebrew slave, and then when no one was looking, he buried him in the sand. Although he was raised in Pharaoh's

household, he ran for fear of his life, because the truth of what he had done had come to light. Here in the Midian wilderness, God issued a call to Moses.

I've always been amused at how this scene has been depicted by filmmakers over the years. More often than not, they present Moses as one who speaks with an Elizabethan accent and says, "Look yonder at this most amazing thing. There is a bush that is burning, and yet it is not consumed. I shall turn aside and investigate this more closely to see what the bush is burning, and yet it is not consumed." I think it is more likely that Moses actually said, "Good golly, Miss Molly! What's happening over there?!"

Here in the Midian wilderness God called Moses, and He began by asking him a question, "*What is that in your hand?*" (4:2). As the story unfolds, we learn several principles about how to overcome a reluctant faith and how to trust God with your life.

I. What We Have Can Be Used By God.

I want you to notice God's choice of the ordinary in this text. God called Moses to throw down his staff. It was an ordinary everyday item any shepherd would have used as he/she went about their daily labors. It was a standard item any shepherd might carry. This teaches us a valuable lesson. God doesn't need the impressive, the powerful things of this world to do His work. Oftentimes it is His desire to use the ordinary, the unimpressive things by the world's standard to demonstrate His glory and power.

Later on in the OT God used another shepherd, this time by the name of David, who on the outside was not all that impressive. As a matter of fact, when David's father Jesse was assembling his sons together so that the prophet Samuel might meet with each of them in order to determine who the next king of Israel was going to be, Jesse didn't even have David in the lineup! He was left out tending the flocks of the family out in the field. But as the Lord told Samuel that day, "*The Lord doesn't look at the things a man looks at. Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart*" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Later on in the NT the apostle Paul picked on this idea of God's use of the ordinary when he wrote regarding the Christians in Corinth, "*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong*" (1 Cor. 1:26,27).

God has a habit of taking the ordinary and putting an "extra" on the front of it. I think of Mother Teresa. This simple woman who was born in Albania and stood less than 5 feet tall became a giant of the faith. But she didn't start out that way. She was a simple nun who taught children in a Catholic school in India. But she heard a call from God as she rode on a train to a retreat center from the city of Calcutta where she lived. The Lord told her He wanted her to care for the poor and to help people who were sick and dying to be able to die with dignity. No one could have predicted the worldwide impact this amazing woman of God would eventually have over the course of her lifetime.

Max Lucado once wrote about how God showed up in the ordinary the first Christmas. He writes, "The sheep were ordinary. Common animals.... And the shepherds. They were peasants. They were nameless and simple. An ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds...."

“But God dances amidst the common. And that night he did a waltz. The black sky exploded with brightness. Trees that had been shadows jumped into clarity. Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherds were dead asleep, the next they were rubbing their eyes and staring into the face of an alien. The night was ordinary no more. God comes into the common for the same reason. His most powerful tools are the simplest.”¹

God uses ordinary things and ordinary people to do His work, and there are no throwaways in God's economy. You may not think that you have much to offer in terms of personal gifts or financial resources, but if God can work miracles through an old, dead piece of wood like Moses' staff, just think what He can do with a willing soul who wants to be used by God! The Lord wants our availability more than He does our ability! What we have, whatever it is, can be used by God.

II. What We Yield Can Be Transformed With God's Power.

Before Moses' staff could undergo transformation, he had to yield it up, he had to throw it down, and he had to let it go. As long as he held onto his staff tightly, Moses would never see the transforming power of God – in his staff or in his life.

I think we need to understand what it meant for Moses to throw down his staff. A shepherd's staff was his central point of security in the wilderness, and with it he protected himself as well as his flocks from the attacks of wild animals and thieves. In addition, a staff also represented a shepherd's calling, his identity. It represented what he did for a living, and to throw down his staff meant yielding up who he was, what he did, and what he was known for. What's a shepherd without a staff?

How did Moses react to what God did to his staff? He reacted in fear. The text tells us that when the staff changed into a serpent, he ran from it. Indeed, I think I would, too! It may frighten us to see what God does with what we give over to Him. It may cause us to want to run away, and sometimes things get worse before they get better in the Christian life.

There is a great scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart in which through a series of events that were no fault of his own \$8,000 is misplaced. It put Stewart's character, George Bailey, and the Bailey Building and Loan, for which he was responsible, in financial and legal jeopardy. George comes to the end of his rope in Martini's bar, and he prays for God to help him. But the very next thing that happens is that Mr. Welch realizes who it is that is sitting next to him at the bar, and he punches George's lights out because George had previously yelled at Mr. Welch's wife over the phone. George's response is, “Well, that's what I get for praying.”

Have you ever felt like that? Sometimes things get worse before they get better when you walk with God. But before we can see God work in our lives, we have to yield them up to Him, and we have to give over the control we so desperately want to maintain. As long as we cling tightly to what we're holding onto for security, they will never become what they could be if only we would give them to the Lord.

And when we do, that's when we will see the miracle-working power of God on display in our lives and in the world around us. That's when we can experience the power of God's Holy Spirit flowing through us to do His work. But this will only happen as we yield our lives and all we hold in our hands over to God.

III. What We Receive Back By Faith Can Work Miracles.

Our text tells us that after God transformed Moses' staff into a snake, the Lord told him to pick it back up by its tail (4:4). That's a rather unusual request, isn't it? If I had been the one out in the wilderness and God asked me to pick up a snake by its tail, I know how I would have reacted! I would have said, "Well, Lord, I don't think You've been out here in the wilderness very long. I mean, everybody knows that you don't pick up a snake by its tail. Otherwise it will bite the fire out of you. Now, I know You're God and all that, but this is where I get off!"

Is that how Moses reacted? No. The passage says that he reached out in faith, and I suspect there may have been some fear and trepidation when he did it. Moses took hold of the snake, and it was transformed back into a staff again and he held it in his hand. He did what God requested, and a miracle took place.

When God asks us to do something, it may frighten us to step out in faith and we might be reluctant. We may be convinced that something bad is going to happen to us if we risk for the Lord. However, it is in those moments of fear we must trust the Lord and respond in faith that whatever He asks us to do will be blessed by Him and be in our best interest in the long run. The serpent became a staff again, and God said to Moses, *"This is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob - has appeared to you" (4:5)*

I want you to notice something else about this incident which makes it so remarkable. From this point on in the biblical record, the Bible never refers to this staff any longer simply as the staff of Moses. From this point on it is called the rod of God. And it is with this same rod that the waters of the Nile were turned into blood. It was with this same rod that the ten plagues were sent upon the land of Egypt for refusing to let the people of Israel go. It was with this same rod that the waters of the Red Sea were parted, and the people of Israel passed through on dry ground, but Pharaoh and his army were crushed by the waves. And it was with this same rod that Moses struck the rock in the wilderness, and water gushed forth to quench the thirst of the multitude. The staff of Moses became the rod of God!

Conclusion.

The same question God asked Moses in the wilderness, He asks you and me today, "What is that in your hand?" What do you have that God is calling you to yield up to Him? During this pandemic what are you clinging tightly to that God wants you to let go of and trust Him? It may be something ordinary, like your God-given abilities and talents, your job, your home, your friends, your future. Or it may be something that is very important to you, something that is the central point of your identity or your security in life –your children, your career, your scholarship, your financial future, the respect of your peers. What do you have in your hand God wants you to entrust to Him?

Last week Mike Horne shared with us how this pandemic we're living through is revealing some of the idols in our lives, and God is using this challenging time to convict us of sacrifices we need to make. What idol are you holding onto, just like Moses did his staff. What does God want you to throw down and yield over to Him? And what will it take for you to overcome your reluctance and take that step of faith?

Jim Elliot was one of five missionaries in Ecuador who were martyred by the Auca Indians in 1956. He was speared through the chest by the very people he was trying to reach with the

gospel of Jesus' love. Jim Elliot made the ultimate sacrifice in his service to Christ. He yielded his life into the hands of the Savior for the sake of the gospel. Elliot once wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." Respond in faith to the Lord today. What is that in your hand? Amen.

¹ Max Lucado in *The Applause of Heaven*, p. unknown.