The Call of God, the Cries of the World

Exodus 3:1-12; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Our second scripture focused on God's call to us through the suffering of the world around us. We have two authentic responses to a call like this. The first comes from Isaiah 6. God says, "Who will I send, who will go for us?" The prophet Isaiah responds to God, "Here I am, send me," almost instinctively.

The Second type of response comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who is intimidated by the prospect. It is a response I suppose most of us have to serious challenges where we are not quite sure what we are getting into. Jeremiah says, "Who am I to speak on your behalf, O God? I am only a boy; nobody will listen to me?" It is the excuse most of us have: "God, am I the best you can do? Surely you know experts who could handle this situation better than limited little me?

God responds, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for my Spirit will speak through you, and it will work out.”

In college, they started us off reading Aristotle on how to choose a wise way of living, the golden mean. Not too stingy, not a spendthrift, but become someone who is generous. Our professors asked us, “How do you choose the most excellent way of living?” and they assigned us books from across the centuries that attempted to answer that question.

Today, we have so much choice that it is a little dizzying. Our world has become Amazon, where a nearly infinite variety of options are available to us- not only products to buy, but places to go, vetted by influencers on TikTok, ways to live in faraway places.

My generation is now quaint. I think 92% of the freshman class at Wake Forest was either pre-med or pre-law when I was in college in the ‘70s. This year, Columbia U offers over 80 majors, with three different majors in Economics, one of which you couldn’t possibly do the math if you wanted to. And 30 fields of study didn't exist back then. AI and Robotic engineering, Cloud Computing, Digital Marketing, Social Media Management, Video Game Design (the Frat boy major), Renewable Energy, Sustainable Agriculture.

I almost feel sorry for my grandchildren; so many choices that it is dizzying. And it seems like these choices are more consequential than ever. So, we burn up a tremendous amount of energy trying to figure this out, supporting our kids as they network after college. What should I do for a job? Where

should I live? How much money do I need? We must consider all these options as we find our way in the work world.

Every day during the week, these people commute to New York, click through the list, make choices, and live their lives. That is what was happening on the morning of September 11th as everyone was filing to work in lower Manhattan to stoke the machinery of the international economic order that sustains our lifestyle, bagel in one hand, coffee in the other, hustling not to be late. That is one dimension of our lives, our routine, our track, the lines of destiny that we create for ourselves one day at a time.

But there is another track that emerges only sporadically that is suggested in our story this morning. Moses sees an extraordinary thing. He is in the desert and sees a bush that is

on fire, but it doesn’t burn up, like a candle. By the way, this is why we have candles in worship, in Judaism and in Christianity too. They symbolize the divine presence that illumines the world but does not burn up.

In our story, Moses sees this miracle, goes to check it out, and hears God's voice. As a child, I used to wonder what that would be like. What would it be like if God spoke to you directly? We are told Moses sensed that he was in the presence of the Holy. He took off his shoes and bowed down in deferential respect and awe. I guess so.

We get this clean miracle story out in the wilderness. God appears in an epiphany. God speaks. Boy, don’t you wish God were so clear? Don’t you wish you could get a bead on the divine so clearly? But it isn’t clear to us like that is it? Frankly, it

wasn't all that clear back then either. Because what does God say, "I have heard the cries of your people, who groan in their oppression, who cry in their slavery."

How do we hear the voice of God? In the cries of misery from the world around us. It is not just the woes of human suffering but a transcendent moment where we are addressed by God. Darla Stuckey had a moment like that on September 11th, on her way to her job to pay the bills, the daily commute, when she saw one of the buildings on fire up above and a Nursery School teacher holding two infants, trying to figure out what to do in an emergency.

She embodied the almost instinctual response like Isaiah in our reading this morning. Isaiah says to God, "Here I am, send me". Darla just said to the woman, "I can take one of

those kids for you." She didn't have time to think. She responded intuitively. Her response had been prepared by decades of character formation in her family, in her church, and with her close friends.

But sometimes, the cries of the world around you demand a response from you. You have to step up. You have to assume responsibility and liability for what comes next. You have to act. This is not just about what the world needs around you; it is about who you are and how willing you are to grow.

And what happened next was a bit of a miracle, just like our mothers exhibit week in and week out. Darla ran with that baby as fast as she could uptown, all the way up to 50th Street on the Upper East Side, carrying that child to safety. She told

me that the next day, she couldn't lift her arms off her chest; she was so sore from carrying that child.

It was touching to hear her tell that story for the first time in front of that child, who is now 26. The young woman welled up with tears and said, "Thank you for saving my life." And Darla replied to her, "And you saved my life. Because now I had a mission to get you to safety, and I didn't keep heading to work, where I would have probably died." True Dat!

Viktor Frankl said that this is where we develop our deeper meaning. It is not just about what we want from life. It is in the moments when we rise to the occasion and respond to the needs of the world around us. Then, so to speak, we hear the voice of God. Transcendent meaning comes to us in those unguarded moments when we live out of our higher selves.

We humans are meaning makers. It is not enough for us to simply enjoy material prosperity, the life of leisure and celebrity. We have to live with ourselves. We have to exercise our integrity. We have to respond to the cries of the world around us. What is God asking of you in this moment? What does the world need from you?

Looking back at that tape on Friday, I was reminded of the profound uncertainty around us that day. No one was sure whether to leave the buildings or stay. Was this an accident or something malicious? In retrospect, it all became clear, but in that moment, it was not clear at all. And our lives are like that, aren't they, only clear in retrospect.

But in the moment, it is rarely clear what to do. We have only partial information, and we're not fully sure of the context

or the implications of the actions we see around us. So most of us respond more like Jeremiah. Isaiah instinctively says, “Here I am, send me,” before he even understands the implications of the mission.

But most of us have doubts like the young Jeremiah, mostly self-doubt. “Who am I?” says Jeremiah. Who will take me seriously? I am only a teenager.” I appreciate that response. As we turn toward the fall, I think many of us are asking ourselves questions like that.

Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Jackson Brown described the present administration as deploying the “Catch me if you can” approach to breaking rules and norms until someone stops them. Whether it is tearing down the East Wing and building a ballroom without congressional approval, tearing

down voting rights protections, or violating the civil rights of immigrants by ICE, the method is to act first and then outrun judicial review (which is a very slow process).

I think I speak for a lot of us gathered here when I say that I'm haunted right now by the reflection of Pastor Martin Niemöller in the early days of Nazi Germany, as the rights of citizens were being steadily stripped in the early '30s and he was wondering about how he should respond. Niemöller was a cautious man, quite conservative himself, and he embraced the patriotic pride of the Nazis for quite a while. But there came a moment for him when he was haunted by his conscience because he didn't act. Like Jeremiah, he had a long list of reasons not to get involved: "Who would listen to me? Why is it my job to fight this fight? How bad is this really?" No one quite

knows their historical context when they are in the middle of it.

It is not clear.

But later, it was clear. And then it was too late. Niemoller said
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me. [1]

You can't be that guy; neither can I. You can't sit by idly and let the rule of law erode, knowing what that will mean for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The top floors of the

building are on fire, and we have to act now before the whole edifice comes crashing down into a pile of dust.

How serious is this? What should we do? Is this just going to burn itself out naturally? It's very hard to answer these questions. But we keep asking ourselves these questions because we have to live with ourselves, and I cannot stand the thought of my granddaughters asking me, “Papa, why didn’t you do anything? Why did you let this happen?” And neither can you.

“What does life require of me right now?” asks Viktor Frankl. “What does God want from you right now?” we say in the church. Same question. Viktor Frankl said we fulfill our lives when we ask this question, rather than what will make us happy. It is a much harder question to answer: how to be

faithful in the moment to the demands of the world around us. But that is where our deeper meaning comes from: taking responsibility for the world around us as it exists. Given the reality that is before me, what is the most responsible way of responding?

It is hard to know. So in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I will not leave you alone, like orphans,… but I will send the Spirit to remind who will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have taught you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” We will figure this out together, prayerfully, humbly, probably courageously (because bad stuff really does happen and we are not exempt from it).

Pray together. Compare notes. Live out of your faith perspective. Keep on the quest for deeper meaning, and many

find peace that passes anxiety in your own being. May you generate harmony with your family and closest friends. May you start to see moments of synchronicity in the community around you as you connect with other points of light and gather that light together. For God is closer to you than you know, and you are on a path to blooming the true you, the more noble you. Amen.

Our first reading is one of many examples of God addressing people and the concerns of the world around them. They

remind us that critical moments in our lives call us to respond. I read from Exodus 3.

Now Moses was tending the flock and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” 6 Then he said, “I am the God of your father,[a] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7 The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey… 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

[11] But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh
and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

[12] And God said, “I will be with you