



The Burning Bush behind the Pulpit: Preaching through Self-Doubt

By William E. Butler

Preaching is a unique discipline that can be shaped or fashioned in the context of one's personality and rhetorical ability. No matter how gifted one is in delivering the word of God, the purpose in why we preach should never be lost at any level of eloquence. In her book *Sharing The Word, Preaching in the Round Table Church*, Lucy Rose explores the discipline of preaching further in defining the purpose of preaching in the words of Brodus and Watherpoon as "persuasion." That is to say, a preacher should have enough confidence to communicate in an authoritative manner, persuading people in what they ought to believe and why they should believe it. The listening congregation must not only hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ from clergy that's been trained to deliver but also see a confident vessel that stands unmoving in the power of God's spirit.

This is much easier said than done, however, for a number of clergy that have been called by God from a "burning bush." These individuals, like Moses, hear and recognize God's call despite obstacles that may render them unlikely candidates in others' eyes. There are clergy, such as myself, who still find themselves going back and standing before the burning bush, debating and offering God excuses as to why their purpose

cannot be fulfilled due to physical constraints, psychological or emotional struggles, or like Moses and I—speech impediments.

Thorns of the Flesh

As a Chaplain in the Maryland Army National Guard, I must be willing and prepared to brief commanders that may not be too tolerant of fellow officers who do not have the ability to articulate clearly. It is an unspoken expectation that one must have the ability to enunciate in a clear, concise, non-stuttering voice. I believe all clergy that communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ should work hard to sharpen their rhetorical skills in order to be the best they can be, but there are always "off" moments when words are difficult to verbalize, and one's inner thesaurus is not providing the right synonyms. After a preaching moment, when everyone else has left the building, I am often left revisiting the burning bush behind the pulpit to have the same conversation Moses had with God in Exodus 4: "O Lord, please send someone else to do it" (Exodus 4:13).

Many pastors have found numerous ways of hiding the thorn of stuttering by staying away from certain words, phases or in some cases subjects that bring out the most severe speech imperfections. Nevertheless, even with the developed skills of covering

up an impediment, we still find ourselves being our worst critic, even when we know by faith that God makes the same promise to us that he made to Moses: “Open your mouth and I’ll speak for you.”

Countless clergy deal with their own “thorns of the flesh” that may or may not be possible to hide from the congregation. Blind and deaf clergy and those in wheelchairs are faced with many obvious physical obstacles that threaten to impede their ability to preach or minister to the congregation that they serve. There are architectural barriers or bodily restrictions that become a reality every Sunday or when the opportunity comes to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pastors facing such physical challenges—especially in congregations that are not fully understanding of and flexible to the pastor’s needs—may be plagued by personal questions demanding reassurance that he or she really was called by God to preach the word.

In the realm of emotional challenges, anxiety disorders affect about 40 million adults a year, plaguing them with feelings of fear and uncertainty. Unfortunately, clergy are not exempt from this statistic. Countless clergypersons suffer from various forms of depression but are hesitant in admitting it for fear of endangering their vocations. Many substance abuse clinics are treating clergy who tried to camouflage their anxiety and depression with alcohol or prescription drugs. These pastors, battling their inner demons, find themselves stopping at the burning bush behind the pulpit wondering, “If God really called me to preach, why do I feel so anxious and unworthy?”

What it takes for many anointed and appointed clergy to prepare themselves psychologically as well as spiritually to stand before a congregation will only be known by the individual. Pastors find themselves standing before the bush time and time again, conversing with the Lord about the validity of their call. When the stress of everyday ministry is combined with having to preach through the difficult personal issues pastors inevitably deal with, the burning bush catches on fire anew.

Confidence in the Fire

How Moses dealt with his challenge to ministry is not answered for us directly in scripture, but we can learn a few things from the story of the work God did through him. How can a person best cope with physical or emotional challenges and still hold on to the integrity of one’s call to preach the gospel in an effective and powerful way?

First, God called Moses despite his physical shortcomings. In other words, our call to the proclamation of the word is not predicated upon our ability to carry it out. God isn’t concerned about our abilities but our availability. Being available to be used by God allows the power of the Holy Spirit to work through us regardless of our abilities or lack thereof. When Moses finally accepted his calling, only then was the demonstration of God’s power manifested through him as he faced Pharaoh in Egypt.

I’m also reminded of Paul’s willingness to be vulnerable regarding his ability to speak, “My speech and my proclamation were

not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Paul’s availability to be used by the Lord helped him to focus more on reaching souls for Christ than being a great orator or philosopher. In other words, Paul was not concerned with what people thought about his delivery or ability to appease the emotions of people with eloquent speech patterns. Paul presented the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, God places “Aarons” in our lives to help us. The ministry of Aaron is a calling some feel to lovingly come along side to encourage us. Many times we feel like we’re all alone and no one really understand what we’re going through. The ministry of Aaron is God’s way of telling us that we don’t have to keep revisiting the burning bush every time we experience a bout of self-doubt in our ministry.

God will always provide the necessary resources we need to get through the difficult moments in our lives. These Aarons could come in the form of our spouses, mentors, or friends. “*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).*

Third, God promises divine help in our weakest moments. God has given divine wisdom to many people enabling them to help many people with physical and psychological issues. To experience God’s divine help we must be willing to humble ourselves and seek out the help we need. When we humble ourselves before the sovereign hand of God, we’re telling God that we are willing to put to practice those techniques and practices we’ve learned. Then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be elevated to a new level we’ve never experienced before in the pulpit.

No matter what type of challenge you face in the current reality of your ministry, remember that we can be more than conquerors in him that loved us (Romans 8:37). God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness, and we can always have confidence in his strength, even when we doubt ourselves. If God called us, then God will equip us with the resources we need to speak the word to a world in need of the good news. □

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William E. Butler is Pastor of Living Springs Christian Fellowship, a United Methodist congregation in Bowie, Maryland.