

CALLED TO KNOW

Our Mission

Mark 1:21-39

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For over a month I wrestled with the issue of moving. I prayed and listened for divine direction. After the decision, I thought about leading this church. One morning I awoke early and sat at the edge of the bed. In my mind I saw Moses walking and the nation of Israel in procession behind him. Winding through the Red Sea valley, they ascended rise after rise. Above them, the cloud that God used to signal Moses moved eastward away from the sea. As Moses came up over another rise, he and the people began to march into desert sands. There was scrub brush here and there but no signs of water or food. A murmur grew into rage. Fearful Israelites debated whether God was in that cloud and whether Moses would bring them good or harm. What would give the people faith to keep going?

These folks saw the plagues in Egypt. They experienced deliverance at the Red Sea. Now, however, they were moving into danger. Were malevolent forces using Moses all along to deceive and destroy an entire nation? Was Moses right at first but now wrong? How could they trust Moses? How could Moses lead?

I wondered about us at Bethany. We're living in a period when the church is undergoing radical reformation. Christianity is being profoundly reshaped worldwide. In some places Christianity is exploding. One local church in South Africa baptized 70,000 converts in one day. There are communities and provinces where the rate of conversion is so fast and pervasive that crime and many social ills are disappearing. Yet in the United States and many western countries the Christian church is losing ground. Eighty percent of America's churches are declining or plateaued. Most people outside our churches see what we do as boring and irrelevant to their lives. In the last 30 years the churches of Rochester have lost ground in helping the people of this community come to faith in Jesus Christ. Bethany has not been an exception. As I visualized Moses marching, I realized we are in a reformation period where God is calling us to leave our comfort

zone. God was calling me to do things I've not done and lead people where I've not been. God was calling Bethany to a journey that holds great promise but requires much faith.

Hell opposed Moses, and it opposes us. It came at Moses with an angry Pharaoh and an imposing army. It used the great Red Sea and a barren desert to demoralize him. It attacked him through fearful followers and with Amalekite raiders. How do you think Hell is attacking Bethany? Moses had to remember His mission. He had to remember His call and special identity.

I'm taken with the story of Jesus's first success. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus taught weekly at a synagogue in Capernaum and gained a favorable hearing. One day, however, a man interrupted him, "*Why are you bothering us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One sent from God!*" Jesus rebuked the spirit causing the commotion. The man screamed and convulsed, but soon he was at peace. The demon had left. News of this confrontation and healing spread. By evening a huge crowd gathered to hear and be healed. The next morning before dawn Jesus went to a remote place to pray. Peter and some others found him and said that everyone was asking for him. Jesus, however, left Capernaum saying:

We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too, because *that is why I came* (Mk. 2:38).

Jesus did not let circumstances dictate his life. His mission did. The words "*that is why I came*" directed his actions. Jesus knew his mission and that directed his response to everything.

Attacked for his association with irreverent, offensive, sinful people, Jesus said:

Healthy people don't need a doctor - sick people do. *I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough* (Mk. 2:17).

Jesus reflected on his calling. He thought about why he was here. He talked about it. He said:

For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).

And I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save those like (Zacchaeus) who are lost (Lu. 19:10).

The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness (Jn. 10:10).

Jesus knew that his mission grew out of his identity and relationship with God. He once told questioners that he could only do what he saw his father doing (Jn. 5:19). His activity depended on that relationship. When he called himself the good shepherd, he declared that the good shepherd lays his life down for his sheep. His activity and mission flowed from his identity.

When I arrived at Bethany a year ago, I knew God had a special journey for us. To walk it, we needed to firmly grasp our identity and calling. I took leaders aside and reflected on our name Bethany, on our nature as Christ's church, on the community we serve and on our commands as Christ's disciples. We became convinced that God had a focus for us. We were called to be single-minded, purposeful. Over months of prayer, reflection and discussion we drafted a statement of our call: *"Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ."* We believe that is our command. We believe that is our call.

There is a power in knowing who you are and what your life is about. There is a power in knowing your mission. There is power in a focused life.

This principle is seen with light. Diffuse light has little power. Focus sunlight through a magnifying glass, however, and you can start a fire. Concentrate light in a laser beam and you can cut through a block of steel. Focus is so powerful. In sports it is the difference between winning and losing. In life it is the difference between achievement and attempt.

John Wesley understood this. When the Methodism movement was mushrooming as it brought many to faith, Wesley reminded his leaders:

It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.

Jesus made a difference because he knew his identity and concentrated on his mission. Do you know your identity in Christ? Do you know your call? This is so important.

Let me illustrate. If you are a mother with little children and you don't know your identity, you're just raising kids. But if you grasp your identity in Christ and focus on your mission, you as a trustee raise children of the Almighty to walk with Christ in redeeming the world. As part of Bethany you help them come to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ and you raise them to go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. That is your focus.

Have you come to believe in Jesus? Do you know freedom in him? If not, yield your life to his saving work right now. If you're experiencing freedom, then understand your call!