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"From Ally to Collaborator"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on August 20, 2023, from Exodus 3:1-15*

This morning I want to tell you the story of a hero of mine named James Ian Tyson. One of the things that makes James a hero is that most people have no idea who he is. You might be able to Google the name James Tyson and find some interesting characters who lived throughout history, but you won't find anything about this man. In fact, James is destined to be nothing more than a footnote in history, and that's exactly where James should be. Not all heroes wear capes or appear above fold in the *New York Times*. But there is a picture of James in full hero mode: a young white man, wearing a construction hat and a bright yellow reflective vest, standing at attention with both his hands gripped tightly around a very large pole.

James became one of my heroes because of an event that took place a little over 90 miles South of here ten days after a white supremacist shot and killed nine people at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, SC in 2015 and rocked the soul of our nation. In the days that followed a group of activists gathered to support each other in their grief. After some rest and prayerful reflection, these activists decided they were going to engage in a well-planned act of civil disobedience to take down the confederate flag from the state capitol building in Columbia, SC. Like Jesus sending his disciples on a mission to find a specific colt to ride into Jerusalem, they spent days preparing for the action. They decided that a woman named Bree Newsome would scale the flagpole and take down the flag, but after reconning the site they noticed a small fence around the pole and realized Bree would need help. There were plenty of people they could have picked, but they chose James Ian Tyson. As Bree recalled, "We needed somebody who could help me over the fence. We decided it should be a white man because we wanted to communicate it's not just the role of the people who are oppressed, but also the people who have benefited from oppression who have to be a part of this process. We walked over, and James put his hands down so I could climb over the fence."

I'm sure you all heard about this story in the news and saw pictures of Bree scaling the 30 ft pole and taking down the symbol of slavery and oppression. You might even remember that when the policemen told her to get down, Bree responded, "In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today." (Praise God!) But what you might not know is that the police who responded were very angry and prepared to use any means necessary to get her down.



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They wanted to shake the pole so she would fall, climb up after her and rip her down, or electrocute the pole, and were even prepared to set it on fire, but there was just one problem. A white man named James Ian Tyson was standing the base and holding on to the pole with both hands. If the police wanted to take Bree down, electrocute the pole, or set it on fire, they were going to have to do it a white man first, and we all know they were not going to do that. All James Ian Tyson had to do that day was show up and hold on to that pole. His mere presence made an impact because of the legacy of the symbol they were trying to remove. James and Bree both got arrested that day, but the world only remembers Bree and that's exactly the way it's supposed to be.

Today, on this PRIDE Sunday, I'd like to invite us to reflect on the question—who am I showing up for, who am I putting my hands down for, who am I holding the pole for? Traditionally, the answer to these questions is termed “allyship.” The word “ally” has been around a long time in the English language and initially had military connotations of forming an alliance or treaty until the 1970's when the LGBTQ rights movement began using the term “straight ally” to describe the cis-het people who were showing up to support their movement.

The term entered widespread use in 2010s, grew during the Trump Presidency, and has become especially common since the murder of George Floyd and the global protests that followed. In fact, the word “ally” is so popular that in 2021, it was Dictionary.com's “Word of the Year.” The basic definition of an ally is someone who supports or advocates for a group of people that they are not a part of, but it's a subjective definition and like so many other things in our society, it seems like everyone thinks they're an ally when very few people are actually showing up for others. Because if everybody who thinks they're an ally was an ally, our world would be a very different place.

I'm guilty of this myself. I can't tell you how many times I've hopped onto Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and went on a rant about something like the war in Ukraine or the fires in Maui. But was I being an ally to the Ukrainian or Hawaiian people? No, I was not. Apparently, a lot of other people are doing this as well, imagining themselves to be allies, so much in fact, a new term has been coined to describe this behavior—performative allyship.



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Performative allyship is when we say we support an oppressed community, but don't follow through, or do it for our own benefit, or with insincere motives, for self-gratification, to make ourselves look good, or feel better, or prove we're one of the good people. Merely posting on social media is not being a true ally. Merely putting a rainbow flag on a bank logo is not being a true ally. Merely changing the name of a street or putting up a BLM sign in our yard is not being a true ally. We've all done these things and there's nothing wrong with them, but they do not make us true allies. True allyship requires more than words, or posts, or virtue signaling. True allyship always requires action that elevates, supports, protects, and empowers oppressed people and that works to dismantle the forces that oppress them. There's so much performative allyship in our world today, I think we need a new word for what it looks like shows up, stands tall, and holds the pole. And the word I think best captures that is collaborator.

The story of God calling Moses from the burning bush teaches us a lot about collaboration. Typically, we think of Moses as one of the greatest leaders in all of scripture, who stood up to the largest empire in Egypt, went toe to toe with the most powerful person in the world in Pharaoh, and delivered his people from slavery. But before Moses was a leader, he was a collaborator. We tend to see Moses as the quintessential Israelite, but when God called him from the burning bush Moses was only Hebrew in a biological sense. Moses was raised in the palace by a princess, as an Egyptian prince. Then he killed a man, ran away from home, and went to Midian where he then found a new people, married one of Jethro's daughters, and built a new family. So, when the God of Israel said, "Moses! Moses!" out of a burning bush, Moses was a Midianite first, an Egyptian second, and Hebrew last if at all. Unlike other Hebrews, Moses was never enslaved or oppressed. He experienced the trauma and loss of adoption, but he never had to make bricks and toil all day under the whip of Egyptian taskmasters. His privilege, power, upbringing, education, life experiences, and new family in Midian differentiated him from his biological kin.

When God called Moses, God called him to an oppressed people who were no longer his own and to become a collaborator in a movement for the liberation of the Hebrew people. And Moses' response to God's call teaches us three things about what it means to be collaborators. First, Moses's story teaches us that everyone is called to be a collaborator. Allyship is often defined today as it only describes those who are not oppressed. But what Moses's story (and scholars of intersectionality like Kimberlé Crenshaw teach us) show us is that you can be oppressed and privileged at the same time.



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You can be a woman and white. You can be black and wealthy. You can be LGBTQ and able-bodied. You can be indigenous and highly educated. You can be gay and a man. Oppression and privilege are not zero-sum games. Very few of us live at the intersection of every form of oppression, which means all of us can be collaborators with some oppressed community even if we are oppressed. White women can fight for racial justice. Black men can fight for women. Lesbians can fight for indigenous. Queer folks can fight against ablism. No matter who you are, what your story, or how you identify, there is always a community you can collaborate with.

Moses was what I'd call an intersectional ally. He was biologically Hebrew, but not oppressed. He grew up in privilege and power then left to create an entirely new life in Midian. When God came calling Moses identified as a Midianite. He had a wife and kids; his father-in-law was the chief. He'd left the Israelites behind and wasn't thinking about them much. He did not know them, their story, or their God. Yet, God called him to collaborate with the Israelites in their liberation. Moses could have said, "Those aren't my people." And a lot of Americans are falling into that trap. We know our economic system is oppressing our people but when someone says, "What about those people being oppressed?" we say, "Those are not my people." Jason Aldean's new song "Try that in a Small Town" and Oliver Anthony's new song "Rich Men North of Richmond" are odes to the struggle of poor white folks, but they also demonize the struggles of black people and fat people, and there's simply no reason for that! God calls everyone, privileged and oppressed, to find a way to collaborate with the oppressed in the work of freedom, because as the great civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer said, "nobody's free until everybody's free."

The second thing Moses's story reveals is that to be a collaborator we must have humility. The first thing Moses said when God called him was, "Who am I that I should go?" We cannot be true allies or collaborators if we pridefully think the oppressed need our help. That is a sure path to paternalism and saviorism. Collaborators are not the saviors of the oppressed. There is only one savior and that's Jesus H. Christ, the son of Mary, from the town of Nazareth in Galilee. All the rest of are pretty lousy saviors. We can't even save ourselves. In 1985 Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, attended the United Nations Decade for Women ceremony, held in Nairobi, Kenya. The U.N. had invited an Australian Aboriginal artist named Lilla Watson to speak and hearing her had a profound effect on Milk's life and activism. Speaking to a room of UN delegates Watson said, "If you are here to help women, people of color or people of different ethnicities, then go home. You are wasting your time. However, if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."



Even God models humility for us in Exodus 4. Did you notice God said to Moses, "I listened to the cries of the oppressed and I've heard their desire for deliverance." God listened to the cries of the oppressed and then acknowledged their desire for deliverance. God did not say, "I heard your cries for deliverance and I'm going to give you a Pizza Hut." Or "I've heard you want liberation and I'm going to give you another non-profit organization." No God listened to the people's cries and responded to their desires. James Ian Tyson did not tell Bree Newsome, "I heard you want to take down the flag, but I think we should have a prayer vigil." No, because the oppressed get to choose what action they feel is needed for their restoration. The oppressed must have the autonomy to determine what they need to be whole again, and allies and collaborators must understand we have no say in that. Our egos are the biggest impediment to becoming a true ally or collaborator. Egoism makes us think that somehow as outsiders we know what the oppressed need. Even when we do follow their lead, our egos want to get all the credit. But for Bree to get the credit James had to be a footnote, which means all of us should come to the work of collaboration and liberation with the attitude, "Who am I that I should go?"

So first, everyone is called to be a collaborator, second, we have to show up with humility and third, Moses' calling demonstrates that we cannot be collaborators until we learn the history and beliefs of the people to whom we've been called. When Moses asked God, "What am I supposed to say to these oppressed people when I arrive?" God said, "Tell them the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has sent you." What's implied in this powerful statement of God's identity is that we cannot collaborate with oppressed people unless we know their God and their ancestors. In order to collaborate with oppressed people, we have to learn their story. Moses may have been told the stories of his ancestors by his mother Jochebed as she nursed him in Pharaoh's palace, but by the time he was adult in Midian we can assume he'd all but forgot them. So, God's statement meant that Moses would have to relearn and remember the stories of his ancestors in order to know how to collaborate with the people of Israel authentically and effectively.

A friend of mine, Dr. Ijeoma Ononuju says "the first key to embracing true allyship is to understand we are entering a community that is not our own, therefore our entry must be facilitated by a willingness to assume the role of a learner. The community must have the opportunity to own the role of expert and teach us what is essential and important." There's a fancy word in anthropology for this: legitimate peripheral participation, which says we should enter other communities as if we know nothing, understanding our care cannot be contingent on presumed friendship or reciprocity.



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We must be willing to put aside everything we know to learn what the oppressed know and do no more than we're asked to do. James Ian Tyson didn't try to climb the pole and neither should we. We're called to try our hardest to learn what the oppressed are trying to tell us about the issues they face and the form of liberation they desire. We can't help anyone without knowing their history. We cannot be allies without knowing other people's stories. We cannot become collaborators unless the oppressed become our educators.

When we collaborate our goal should be to show up, elevate, support, empower and work with oppressed communities to dismantle the forces of oppression that they are facing. If our goals are about us, and what we need or want, then that's a surefire way to know we are not yet ready or capable of being a true ally or collaborator. But when we make goals about the community, the good news is, that we will find ourselves as well. Just this week, on Wednesday, transgender youth in the state of NC lost access to gender affirming medical treatments after the General Assembly overrode the governor's vetoes of legislation and other bills touching on gender in sports and LGBTQ instruction in the classroom. One of the bills that took effect immediately bars medical professionals from providing hormone therapy, puberty-blocking drugs, and surgical gender-transition procedure to anyone under 18. The rainbow flags and PRIDE parades, and "love is love is love" that we engage in this weekend in Charlotte is amazing and beautiful, but it won't protect trans kids if it's just a performance. We have to do something. We have to act. We have to find a way to show up for oppressed peoples that truly makes a difference.

The most important part of the story of Moses is that when God called Moses to go, Moses went. Yes, he had some questions. Yes, he showed humility. Yes, he had to remember the stories of the ancestors and learn their history of the oppressed. But when God said "Go" Moses went. The difference between true ally and performative ally is action. The difference between a bystander and a collaborator is action. Action is everything because action is embodied, action is risky, action is costly, action is sacrificial, action is dangerous, but action is what changes things. Today, every one of us is standing before a burning bush. Every one of us is being called into collaboration with the oppressed people of history. Every one of us is being summoned to listen to their cries of the oppressed and to learn what form of liberation they desire. Every one of us is being beckoned to join with God in the great movement for freedom and deliverance in our world. The question is not "If?" or "When?" or "Where?" The question is "Who?" Who are you showing up with? Who are you elevating? Who are you supporting? Who are you empowering? Who are you listening to? Who are you learning from? Who are you holding the pole for?