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"No Excuses"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on August 27, 2023, from Exodus 4:1-15*

The famous Jewish philosopher Jerry Seinfeld has a joke where he reminds his audience that the number one fear people have is speaking in public and number two fear that people have is death. This means, as he hilariously points out, that the average person attending a funeral would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. Seinfeld's statistics are on point. Less than 50% of the population fears their own death, but surveys say at least 75% of people suffer from Glossophobia, which is the scientific name for the fear of public speaking.

We might imagine that Moses suffered from Glossophobia given the way he responded when God called him to go back to Egypt to speak to the people of Israel and proclaim to Pharaoh "Let my people go." Moses said, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." The Hebrew there is not the word "slow" but "heavy." What Moses' literally told God was, "I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue," and for centuries, Rabbis and scholars have tried to understand exactly what Moses meant.

Sigmund Freud thought Moses spoke fluent Egyptian and Midianite but could not speak Hebrew. Other historians believe he spoke with a "heavy" accent. One rabbinic legend says that as a young boy Moses burnt his tongue on hot coal, which changed the way he talked. However, the scholarly consensus today among Jewish and Christian academics, after centuries of research is that Moses stuttered or stammered. Today we would say that Moses had a speech impediment.

Later in Exodus, Moses describes himself as not having control over his lips, which is exactly how people in the stuttering community often say they feel. Ten years ago, three medical researchers published a paper in the journal *Neurological Science*, that suggested even more evidence. They found that Moses' story conveys three of the tell-tale symptoms of stuttering: "fear, the pattern of negation/hesitation/avoidance, and finding someone else as a spokesperson." The paper goes on to state that speech impediments are genetic abnormalities often associated with environmental stressors including a new home, social pressure, or negative experiences at early ages—all of which describe Moses. They also found that stuttering is more prevalent among people who are bi-lingual, and it's safe to assume Moses knew at least two if not three languages.



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So, theologians and scientists agree that Moses had a speech impediment. Even though we can never know for sure, seeing Moses this way changes how we read the Bible. If Moses did not have a fear of public speaking, but a true speech impediment, then his resistance to God's call makes more sense. If Moses had a speech impediment, then it is safe to assume his reluctance was about far more than fear or humility, it was about his body. Moses did not believe he had the physical and mental ability to do what God was asking him to do.

Now I know what every armchair pastor in the sanctuary is thinking right now: "God does not call the equipped, but God equips the called." Give yourselves an "Amen," but hold on to your favorite theological catch phrases for a moment as I ask a slightly different question. Why would God call a person with a speech impediment to engage in one of the most difficult and complex acts of public speaking in history? Moses must have thought this was some kind of sick joke. Was God showing off or trying to make a point? Why wouldn't God choose someone who had no speech impediments? Why make things difficult? And why put Moses through this process?

Why not start by calling his brother in the first place? Why didn't God call A-Aron? I know we pronounce it Aaron, but I love that *Key & Peele* comedy sketch where the Black substitute teacher is taking roll and mispronounces all the white kids' names. But seriously, why didn't God just call A-Aron right from the start? It would have made things so much simpler. Why would God choose a prophet with a speech impediment? Why would God choose a mouthpiece with a speech disability? This is the question Moses keeps asking, and it's an important question that's hard to answer.

There's a Hebrew scholar Sarah Wolf who offers a radical answer. She says that God chose a person with a speech impediment because God has a speech impediment. God chose a person with a disability because God is disabled. "[In this story] she writes, "God was explaining to Moses that just as God can't and doesn't speak directly to most people, so too Moses will not have to do all the speaking himself. God calls prophets because God is a being who needs assistance with speaking. And just as God speaks through a prophetic agent, so too will Moses as the representative of God, have his own mouthpiece, his brother Aaron. God understands what Moses needs because God needs the same things. In fact, God seems to suggest, astonishingly, that to require assistance is part of what it means to be God! [So] perhaps God was reminding Moses that all humans are created by God, and in all our physical diversity and differences we remain the image of God.



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Being created in God's image does not mean humans are endowed with some kind of divine perfection, but that we are granted both abilities and disabilities, which mirrors something essential about the divine as well. It may seem strange to consider God as having a disability, even a speech impediment. Yet this is also a powerful way to conceptualize a God who [speaks through prophets] and gave a revelation that requires human interpretation. To be godly, as well as to be human, is to have both power and limitations, to be both abled and disabled. [Which means], a prophet with a speech impediment is not a person with a flaw to be overcome, but rather the truest representation of the divine voice."ⁱ

What if Sarah is right? What if God didn't call Moses despite his disability, but because of it? What if God called Moses because his speech impediment was a revelation of who God is in God's self? If God has limitations, if God needs assistance, if God is impaired, if God is disabled, that changes everything. It changes how we think about God. It upsets all the nice, neat, clean theological categories we use to put God in a box. They mean nothing. God cannot be contained in the human imagination. God is loose from our theories, beliefs, theologies, and ideologies. But it doesn't just change who God is—it changes how we think about us and the world.

All of us have power and limitations, abilities and disabilities, enhancements, and impairments, wholeness and woundedness. We tend to think about our limitations, disabilities, impairments, and wounds as if they are things we need to overcome, improve, heal, fix, or evolve. The world wants us to believe that our wounds and limitations are deficiencies that make us less than others, or disqualify us from certain activities, positions, or places of service. But what if—like Moses—our limitations are the reason God wants us and the place God calls us? What if our wounds are God's way into the best, brilliant, and most beautiful parts of ourselves? What if the thing that makes us the most human is what makes us the most divine?

This summer my daughter and I had an opportunity to tour the site of Harriet Tubman's childhood home in Dorchester County MD where the famous mural is painted of her busting through a brick wall and reaching out her hand as if to say, "Come with me and I'll show you the way to freedom." I thought I knew a lot about Harriet Tubman. I knew she was enslaved for 27 years, before escaping the plantation and returning time and again, risking her life to lead her family and friends on dangerous missions to freedom. I knew she was a leader on the Underground Railroad and worked as a scout, spy, and nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War and led the successful Combahee River raid which freed 750 enslaved people. I knew John Brown called her "General Tubman" and enslaved people called her "Moses." I knew she became part of the women's suffrage movement and was great humanitarian, but what I did not know is that Harriet Tubman was disabled.



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As a child Harriet suffered a severe head injury when an overseer threw a two-pound metal weight at a slave attempting to flee, but struck Tubman instead, breaking her skull leaving her bleeding and unconscious for two days. As a result of this traumatic brain injury, Tubman experienced extremely painful headaches, seizures, and fainting spells. Some scholars think she may have had temporal lobe epilepsy, or narcolepsy and cataplexy, but whatever her condition Harriet struggled with it for the rest of her life. After her injury, Tubman began having visions and vivid dreams, which she interpreted as revelations from God. These spiritual experiences led her to a deep and passionate faith in a liberating God, which (as we all know) had a profound effect on her life and the history of the world. God did not cause Harriet Tubman to be disabled, but just like with Moses, God showed up at the site of her injury and called her to become an agent of liberation and to act decisively and defiantly to deliver people from the bondage and oppression of slavery.

In the verses leading up to Exodus 4, Moses gave seven different reasons why he couldn't follow God's call: lack of capability, lack of message, lack of authority, lack of speech, lack of fitness or adaptation, lack of previous success, and lack of previous acceptance. But what Moses found out is that there are no excuses when it comes to following God's call. There are no excuses when it comes to following God's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, but it's not because there are no reasons for reluctance or resistance.

There are reasons to be reluctant, just no excuses not to follow. There are no excuses not to follow God's call, but it's not because God is going to heal all our wounds, cure all our disabilities, or transcend all our limitations. There are no excuses not to follow God's call, but it's not because God calls the equipped or equips the called. There are no excuses not to follow God's call because our limitations, disabilities, impairments, and woundedness are exactly the place where God shows up. The thing that the world claims disqualifies you is the very place where God calls you. There are no excuses not to follow God's call because our humanity reflects who God is and it's the greatest gift that we have to give the world. God doesn't call us despite our wounds and limitations, but because of them.

If you've read Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings*, then you may remember that she was assaulted when she was eight years old, became afraid of her own voice, and was mute for the next five years. In an interview with Oprah, Maya talked about how whenever her grandmother would braid her hair during those years she would say, "Maya, I don't care what these people around this town are saying about you being dumb because you can't speak, because I know that when you and the good Lord are ready, you're going to be a preacher."



Maya said she would think, “Oh my poor misguided grandmother.” “But later in life,” she said, “My grandmamma was right. I became a preacher in my own way.”ⁱⁱⁱ It was in that period of silence that Maya developed, her love for books and literature, her extraordinary memory, and her ability to listen and carefully observe the world around her. Through her grandmother, God showed up at the site of Maya’s trauma and called her to use words to become a poet and writer who would help to liberate the world.

Theologian Nancy Eiesland wrote a book called *The Disabled God*, where she said there’s a reason the body of the risen Jesus still bears the wounds of his crucifixion on his hands, feet, and side. It’s because Jesus’ body had not been cured and made whole; his injury was still part of him, neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for healing. The resurrected Christ is a disabled God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends,” Nancy writes, “the resurrected Jesus reveals the disabled God. Jesus calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks their own impairment, their own disability, their own wounds, their own limitations, their own connection with God, their own salvation.

The disabled Jesus is the revealer of a new humanity...a revelation of true personhood, the reality that personhood [and divinity] are fully compatible with the experience of disability.”ⁱⁱⁱ According to Eiesland, “The disabled God is a God for whom interdependence is a necessary condition for life; a fact of both justice and survival. The disabled God embraces practical interdependence, [and] posit a [God] who needs care and mutuality as essential to human-divine survival debunks the myth of individualism and hierarchical orders in which transcendence (somehow) means breaking free of encumbrances and needing no one.”^{iv}

We know the American myth of rugged individualism is a lie that is used to divide us from one another, to keep rich richer and the poor poorer, and to avoid looking at the systems of oppression that are bearing down on all of us in different ways. But there’s another lie closely related to the myth of rugged individualism, and that’s the lie that being totally self-reliant, self-sufficient, and independent is what makes us strong. But that is not the Bible’s vision of strength. Nor is it what science says our strength comes from. Like every other species on the planet, we rely and depend on each other for basic needs and work together to create our communities. Human beings are dependent rational animals, and it is our interdependence on each other that makes us human and makes us divine.



This is why every spiritual tradition points us back to relationships, community, acts of service, loving our neighbor, and helping those in need. All those spiritual traditions are pointing us back to what we were created to be—dependent rational animals who live in peace and harmony with God, our neighbors, and all living things. Turning back toward this human centered interdependence is more critical than ever, now that we’re living in a society that was not built for everyone and has no interest in caring for people’s basic needs of food, water, shelter, air, and belonging. What makes us strong is knowing we can’t do it alone, we need each other, and we have to help each other. Individualism is a lie, but interdependence is human, and whatever is most human is most divine.

There is both grace and challenge for all of us in a relationship with a disabled God. The grace is that a disabled God comes to us at the site of limitations, disabilities, wounds, and impairments—our deepest humanness and calls us from those places to do great things because our human imperfection reflects the divine and the greatest gift that we have to give the world. The grace is that God does not expect us to fulfill that calling all on our own. God promises to never leave us, to always be with us, and to send us brothers, sisters, family, and friends like Aaron to help us complete the journeys that have been laid out before us and to support us as we seek to fulfill the callings to which we’ve been called.

But the challenge of a disabled God is that God cannot and will not save us, or deliver us, or liberate us without us. God needs our help and wants our help, which is exactly why God calls human beings in the first place. Because when it is a disabled God who calls us, there is no reason we cannot respond, nothing that disqualifies us from service, and no excuses we can make to avoid the mission. There is no aspect of our humanity that prevents us from following. There is no part of our identity that makes us ineligible. There is no piece of our lives that precludes us from participation. There is no facet of our being that can stop us from responding. The thing we think disqualifies us is the very place where God calls us. Every one of us is being called and every one of us must find our way to participate in God’s great movement of freedom and liberation. We know that if we are left to our own devices, we will not succeed. But the good news is we are not alone. We have a disabled God, a wounded Messiah, an imperfect Church, and we have each other—with all our power and limitations, abilities and disabilities, enhancements, and impairments, wholeness and woundedness. We have each other and we are enough.

ⁱ Sara Wolf, “Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?” *JTS Torah Online*, January 20, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Maya Angelou, in an interview on the Oprah Winfrey show.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Abingdon, 1994.

^{iv} Nancy Eiesland, “Encountering the Disabled God,” *The Other Side*, September & October 2002.