

"Claim Your Power"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, February 20, 2011

Shh...did you hear that? Listen! There it is again.

Did someone call my name? Here I am!

Oh, sure, I'll take off my sandals...but I might also need to sit down for a minute.

So you're God? THE God? Oh WOW. I'm am not sure I can even bear to look! If I could plug my ears and cover my eyes at the same time, I would do both... You want me to do what? Really?

[to congregation] Can you believe this? Can you hear any of this? No? No, of course not. That would be too easy.

*So, I am the one? Me? The one who has trouble speaking up, you want **me** when I could think of so many other good choices off the top of my head? **Me?! Really?! Who am I? Who am I to speak on such things? Where is my authority to speak to pharaohs and Levites and kings? Who am I to speak to the powerful? Are you sure I am the right person for this job?***

And just exactly what is it I am supposed to say to these people? And to my family? You know, telling people I heard a voice tell me to do something is not usually a good idea, and I'm not sure the burning bush story will help my credibility any...

So let me just make sure I understand what you want me to do: I am going to go and place myself in the middle of those who could annihilate me or enslave me, and tell them that God has sent me on this mission? Wow. Well, I'm not sure if you understand my reputation around here; there are a lot of people who do some crazy things in the names of gods, and there are a lot of gods in these parts that tell people to do some pretty terrible things.

Uh huh, uh huh, okay.

So I'm supposed to tell them "Ehyeh asher Ehyeh"? That I am what I am, I will be what I will be. I'm not going to get out of this, am I?

*So I leave here, leave what I know, change course, go to the people and tell them "I am...has sent me"? I am...is enough? And you want me to go to the Elders, the wisest of the people, and tell them first? Well I guess if **they** believe me, then I can convince anyone. They are a pretty tough crowd.*

What if we are called to deliver a message to the people? A message that cannot be separated from who we are? A message that is crafted from the details of our experience, our successes and failures, our ideas and our feelings? What if you are holding a vital piece of information that the world needs in order to change, or progress, or heal? What if not using your gifts – not sharing your learnings – holds us all back? Before Moses took God up on this particular mission, he began with Here I Am.

I have a friend who today is quite a confident and accomplished professional, but you wouldn't have believed that was possible if you knew her into her twenties. You see, she was taught very early in her life that the more she disappeared, and the quieter she was – the more she went along, staying out of conflict and out of the way – the better person she was. Good girls didn't ruffle feathers. Good girls weren't in the way, didn't draw attention to themselves. She was rewarded for her silence and for stuffing her feelings, so she confused goodness with diminishing her worth and value. It was a terrible situation. This confusion eventually led to her addiction. In order to cope with having to silence her needs and wants, she numbed herself from life because she believed there was no place for her in this world – no place for her experience, her thoughts, wishes, and dreams.

There was a time when she was living in Chicago in her twenties, and she needed the bus system to get around. She would be commuting from one part of the city to another and would head to the bus stop. If the bus was already there when she arrived and she couldn't easily see the front with the number and the destination clearly marked, she would just get on. Because it was there, and because she didn't want the bus driver or anyone on the bus to think that she didn't know where she was going. She would just climb on the bus, and if it was the wrong bus she would just ride the entire route until she could get off where she began and start all over again. Frustrated, and angry, and sad, and silent. This was, of course, not an efficient way for her to get where she was going. Sometimes she'd get lucky and end up on the right bus anyway. A lot of the time, though, she would end up on the wrong bus, unclear about where she was going, unwilling to bother anyone, even the bus driver whose job it was to tell her. It was as though she did not even feel worthy enough to ask the question! She was stuck.

That same stuck feeling comes up in some couples I work with, where the couples don't name what they're feeling and thinking because they're in this crazy pattern, this stuck cycle where there's anger, and then one person just shuts down and gets quiet. You know what I'm talking about? Do you know anyone like that? That's not my daughter, she's talking just fine. But do you what I'm talking about, when one of the persons in the couple just gets quiet, and then things are at a standstill – they either forget about it and never mention it again, or it's the same argument that goes on year after year and they just numb out.

She says today that it was a period of her life when all anyone could say about her was that she was *nice*. Nice has value, don't get me wrong, but when it is not supported by integrity, substance, a perspective...it feels empty. And ungrounded nice will eventually implode; will ooze those emotions that have not been handled or expressed. You probably know someone like that, someone whose words are nice? If there was a transcript of everything they were saying it would look and seem nice, but the tone and inflections and expressions carry unspoken emotion, often anger, behind it. Often in our culture, the default assumption is that silence suggests agreement, and on closer reflection it is clear that there are many situations where that is simply not true. If we don't have a means to get the information we need, or a place to talk about what's on our hearts or minds, we are in trouble, and we too might implode. So we need an appropriate time and place to be able to talk these things out. Obviously you're not going to go to your boss and say, "I really think that you're a jerk." Right? But if you're talking about specific behaviors, it would probably be a good thing for you to have someone else to talk to as practice for you to have a healthy conversation with your boss about the kind of behaviors that might need to be talked about. So if we don't speak up about where it is that we want to go, we might be the one on the wrong bus, riding along when we feel called to be going in a different direction.

Before we speak up, we must first know who we are, what our motivations are. "Here I am," says Moses, "this is what I think, this is what I feel, this is what my experience has taught me." It reminds me of a poem by Marianne Williamson, who wrote:

It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us
Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other
People won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of
God that is within us
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,

Our presence automatically liberates others.

How do we know when it is God calling us to do something, to be something, to speak up, to move to a new place to take a different job, to make an important decision or commitment? How do we know when it is God's voice? Last week, Marlin talked about when *not* to listen to God when he discussed the Abraham and Isaac story. Marlin suggested that Abraham made two central mistakes: the first was that he claimed to *know* the will of *God*, and as Marlin pointed out no one knows the will of God, and so we must come to any call or pull with humility and discernment, not from a place of certainty. The other mistake that Abraham made in the Abraham and Isaac story was that he believed he could be religious alone. Abraham did not check out his story with Sarai, or anyone else for that matter. He acted without consultation from those he trusted to discern with him.

So how do we know it is God's voice? When we greet the idea with curiosity and humility. When we can be entirely transparent about the question to those we respect and love. We can know it is God's claim on our lives when we have weighed the pros and cons, reflected on how this decision is integrated into the story of our own life, have spoken to those we consider wise, and cannot do otherwise. I did this when I left teaching for the ministry. A job I deeply loved. I was a goof teacher, I loved my students. I was safe, secured likely until retirement. I had reached the peak of that position – was trained as a teacher of other teachers. And yet I knew I was not using all of my gifts.

Sometimes our call comes from misfortune, like losing a job or a relationship. When we lose something that has been at the center of our life for so long, we can be freed to remember, to discern what we may have always wanted but forgotten. I have ministered many as they took the loss of a job as an opportunity to become a writer, open a restaurant, or go back to school. My discernment was three years. I talked about it with people I loved. I wanted to be sure I wasn't running away from something, that the call laid a claim upon my life that was an approach to something bigger and not an excuse for an escape. I heard the call again and again until I could ignore it no longer. And Debra is modeling this for us in her decision to leave All Souls for a new call in her life,

pushing her to be more of herself in her ministry, pushing her to use more of her gifts to serve. She is responding after deep discernment. Here I Am. Here I Am.

I know that there are some of you here today who are planners, myself included, who cannot imagine getting on a bus without careful planning, without a highlighted route map and careful discernment of arrival and departure times. Who ask for directions and even advice from those on the bus, looking for better and better ways to arrive at their destination. I love y'all too. If you can't relate to my friend, I understand, and I have something for you too. One is that that if the bus story doesn't fit, think about perhaps that relationship in your life – maybe it was a long time ago – but a relationship that you got into or stayed in blinded by what at the time you called love. You know the one I'm talking about, the one where you saw some flags along the way...okay, maybe A LOT of flags...RED FLAGS... Does there have to be a burning bush to get your attention? Maybe your best friend didn't like the way she talked to you? Or you hesitated introducing him to your family? You felt like your entire identity was lost, you didn't know where YOU were anymore, the boundaries between where you ended and the other person began were fuzzy.

We have silenced ourselves in the past, hidden important feelings, silenced our own voice, even fooled ourselves. Made the mistakes of Abraham before us, ignoring ourselves and trying to go it alone. So when someone is silent among us, we have a responsibility. If we are the silent one, we have a responsibility to speak our truth in love. And if we are the one speaking and the silent one is among us, we need to take the time to seek the truth about their silence in love.

Claim your power. The inherent value given to all of us, granted us by our creator. Check to see that the bus is going in the direction you want to go. And if you are the one in power already, if you are the most powerful one in the room, the message this morning for you is to claim your power. And I mean claim your power, and not someone else's! Don't assume silence is agreement – you may be missing a valuable perspective or piece of information that only they can provide. For whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me. So if you are the bus driver, it is also your responsibility to make sure that the people on the bus want to go where you are going.

That doesn't mean that you change your route to deliver them all to their individual houses...

So I want to give you a task: a behavior, a starting place for raising your awareness about claiming your own power. It is the same for those who have been getting on the wrong busses as it is for those who are driving the bus. Claiming your power begins with looking yourself in the eye: know thyself, to thine own self be true we are told. Every morning look yourself in the eye and claim your power. See that spark of holiness, that inherent value; look for it, recognize it, honor it, so that you can meet another's gaze in the world with confidence. Claim it. Cultivate love and increase mutuality. Let your power be guided by love and in relationship.

And if you are in power, the morning question in front of the mirror is one of integrity. Claim your power: ask yourself, are you claiming more than your own power? How can you help to increase someone else's power in the conversation? Claim *only* your power. Claim it. Cultivate love and increase mutuality.

Moses took the staff, and ended up leading the people through the wilderness to the promised land.