

Dear LAUMC: Letters to a Church in (Re)formation
You Are People of Generosity and Action
Exodus 3:1-12

I have been reflecting on my years of ministry, among you and in other places. Thinking about what are the things that compel us toward faith, and the things that get in the way of faith most regularly. What gives us comfort and reassurance that we're on the right track. What makes people—you—worry that you might have missed something important.

The question I think have heard people ask most consistently over the years is 'What is my purpose? Is there some purpose for my life that I'm supposed to know, or figure out? Am I supposed to be doing something more than living the life that is in front of me right now?' That question comes in different forms at different times in our lives, of course. When you're in high school, you hear it as 'What are you going to major in in college?' When you're retired, it sounds like 'What is life about when neither a job nor family obligations tell you every day that you're needed?' And almost everyone in between those two categories asks, 'Is this all there is? Is there supposed to be something more?'

For me, and for a long time, I thought the question was, 'Am I in the right career?' The profession I entered after law school felt to me surprisingly disappointing. I wanted to spend every day loving my work, and I didn't. I wanted to feel like my work was adding value to the world, directly, making a difference. I think many of us expect to find our purpose through our work. That's an American culture thing; most of the world, for most of the time, has not thought that compensation for our work has to include psychic fulfillment.

And that expectation comes only with some level of privilege, of course. People who spend long hours every day just to keep food on the table for their families don't worry so much about finding some other meaningful work, or purpose. This is what the psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous work was about. There is, Maslow said, a hierarchy of needs that seems to be part of every human life. First our survival needs must be met: food, water, clothing, sleep, shelter. Once a person's basic needs are satisfied, the preference for order and stability sets in. Only when we are safe and secure do we become aware of our need for love and belonging, and then for esteem and status in the eyes of others. Finally, when all those needs are met, we can focus on self-actualization, Maslow said; a sense of living up to our full potential. A purposeful life.

The need for God, for faith, can weave through every level of that pyramid, of course. It's we who change; the need we feel most urgently becomes the lens through which we see and hear the story that gives us a glimpse of God.

Today we read another of the earliest stories of our tradition. About Moses, who heard a call to his life's purpose one day as he stared at a strange thing: a bush that seemed to be on fire without getting burned up. A fire that blazed but did not destroy.

Here's the back story. Moses had been raised in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh, the king. He was the child of a Hebrew slave, one of the descendants of the twelve tribes we talked about last week. But Moses was adopted as an infant, when a princess found him in a basket floating in the Nile River. His mother had put him there, an act of resistance to one of the regular threats the Egyptian slaveholders made to the lives of those Hebrew slaves and their children.

So all his life Moses had been special, full of promise, a person with great potential. Everybody told him that. He believed it about himself. But as a young man, he made some mistakes, got into serious trouble. Maybe had a little anger management problem. The people who had had big hopes for Moses' life gave up on him. They weren't so sure about him anymore, and neither was he.

You can travel up that hierarchy of needs, but you can also go back down again. And now Moses just needed a safe place. Some time to nurse his wounded self-esteem, figure out who he was. He was married, which in those days meant a social contract that brought with it a family and structure and responsibility. He spent his days doing work that was quite different from the position he'd imagined for himself. He spent his days standing around keeping an eye on a flock of sheep his father-in-law owned. That is definitely work that would make you wonder about your purpose.

So as this burning bush story begins, Moses is lost. Not physically, but in every other way. He's lost his mojo, any sense that he knows where he's going and what he's supposed to do with his life. Is he going to spend the next forty years leading sheep from one patch of grass to another? Is this what he was born to do?

And then, on a most ordinary day, everything changed. On a day just like every other day, he stood guarding the same sheep he'd monitored the day before and the day before that. On a patch of land no more holy than any other place. He looked up and a plant, one of a hundred plants just like it in his sight, was on fire. The oddness of it caught Moses's attention. He stared at it long enough to see that the bush wasn't getting burned up, and the fire wasn't dying out. Long enough to pause the repeating script in his head, open some space inside of Moses that had been, until that very moment, filled with his own unhappiness, his churning spirit. He heard a voice that was not his own.

'This is God,' the voice introduced itself. 'I want to talk to you about something. My people are oppressed by their slave-masters in Egypt. I've seen them. I've heard their cry of injustice. I know about their pain.' Moses knew the Hebrews slaves' pain too. He knew it firsthand; this Voice was not bringing him news of a social condition he was unfamiliar with. But this Voice had identified itself as God, the God of Moses' ancestors. This Voice was more than the usual social commentary that played in his head, the one that always ended with 'Someone should do something about that.'

"I'm going to rescue them," the Voice said. 'I've seen my people's oppression. I can't let it go on. I'm going to do something about it.'

And then came the words that changed everything for Moses. *'I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. So get going.'*

Somehow, the focus of attention in this conversation had shifted. The Voice that began with God's action—*I heard, I see, I will do*—suddenly turned to *you*. *You go*, Moses. *You go* to Pharaoh and confront him. *You* are the one who will bring liberation to your people. *This is my purpose*, God said to Moses; *but it is your work*.

This is the story we live in: God recruits and inspires human beings—us—to bring God's purposes to reality. To do the things God promises. To take the actions that will make the world what God intends for it to be.

So maybe the purpose each of us seeks, the purpose we were born to live, the purpose we are restless until we find, isn't ours; it's God's.

Here's what I think: People of faith seek meaning and purpose just like everyone else does. But we find our purpose differently. We are a people who trust that the cries and even the whispers of the oppressed still come to God's ears. We are a people who believe that the ancient promises of God, for well-being and justice for everyone, are still active. We are a people who understand that the way God repairs the world, brings justice, nurtures well-being, is through *our* action. This is what God does. This is how God works. In us. Through us. This isn't just God's assignment to us; this is how we find life, our purpose. In God's purposes.

In the whole biblical narrative, we see this pattern over and over again. God doesn't go to people and say 'I've come to bring you happiness and self-esteem.' God says, 'Go. I'm sending you--to bring kindness, or healing, or forgiveness, or justice—whatever it is that your little corner of the world needs today.' And when they do that, when they go where God sends them, the people of God find the sense of purpose they have been missing all along.

A few years ago, a team of us—twenty people or so—were working on a new vision statement for this church. We got pretty quickly to the words *connection, compassion* and *courage*. Those qualities aren't the only marks of spirituality, but they seemed to capture something distinctive about how the people of LAUMC live out their faith. We paused a little longer at the next questions: *Why* does it matter that we live those qualities? What is the end we are living and working toward? And then we knew: the purpose of this church, the purpose God calls us to collaborate in, isn't just good and fulfilling lives for ourselves; it's full life for others as well. For everyone.

Connection, compassion, courage ~ that all may flourish.

This is where we seek, and find, our purpose—not in pursuit of our own contentment, but in our coming alongside God's purpose: life that flourishes for *every* living being.

What does that purpose look like in everyday, real life? Does it mean you have to change jobs? I don't think so. If you hear God telling you to go and speak to Pharaoh, you should definitely do it. But for most of us, the summons is much less dramatic. God's purpose gets put into action

every day not by *what* we do, but *how* we do whatever it is we are doing. By parenting generously and patiently. By working—at whatever our jobs are—collaboratively and humbly. By being a neighbor who infuses kindness into any situation.

It isn't what you do that makes you an agent of God's presence in the world; it's how you show up, the qualities with which you live. God loves adverbs.

Kindly

Generously

Peacefully

Lovingly

God says to us, to you, every day, the same thing God said to Moses. '*Get going. Because the world needs me. And I need you.*'