

Who Am I Really Beneath the Surface?

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[0 : 00] My name is Shea Washington. I use she, her pronouns. I am one of the elders here and part of the preaching team.! So grateful to have this time with y'all again. We are in the fifth week of our series called What Lies Beneath? Moving from the clouded to the clear as disciples of Jesus.

And it's all about deepening our formation as spiritual humans on this Jesus path. It's all about our becoming. Who are we becoming? How are we becoming?

What do we need to let go of or maybe embrace to be more fully formed in the ways of Jesus?

Spiritual formation as shared to us by Pastor Heidi a few weeks ago is the gradual development of the heart of God in the life of a human being.

A quote from Henry Nouwen. We've been talking about this metaphor of the iceberg with only 10% of an iceberg visible above the surface of the water and the remaining 90% is underneath.

And we've been using that metaphor to say that that is also the case with us quite often. That what is visible, the part that we show of ourselves, the part that sometimes we've let ourselves see and deal with is just that 10%.

[1 : 29] But to be more fully formed, to be who our creator created us to be, to move from the clouded to the clear that 90% must be tended to, cared for, loved on.

For these are the roots of who we are. You know, we've all done the acting right thing. But if we haven't allowed ourselves to be right, to be made right, then how long can we really keep up the act?

Who might we be harming along the way? What are we missing out of, of our true selves? What lies beneath is not something to fear.

Pastor Anthony encouraged us a couple of weeks ago that it is where the real work happens. It's where God meets us. And it's not about moving from one form of striving to another form of striving. More to a letting go, a release, not a doing more, but as Trevor said to us last week, creating margin so that we may pay attention and turn aside to investigate the extraordinary right in the middle of the ordinary, such as was with Moses and the burning bush.

[2 : 49] Today's message is called, Discernment and the Conundrum of Calling, a.k.a. What Does It Mean to Live a Life Worthy of the Calling?

That is the full title, and no, I did not name it. Conundrum. Merriam Webster defines it as an intricate and difficult problem.

And what is this intricate and difficult problem when it comes to calling? There can be a lot. What does calling even mean?

And how do we grapple with the ways that it's been abused amongst Christian circles? I'm sure some of us have had the experience of being on the other side of someone's calling.

We're going to talk about all of this. We'll start our exploration by picking back up on the story of Moses and the burning bush. We're going to identify three conundrums when it comes to calling and three guiding practices that can help us live a life worthy of calling.

[3 : 56] But first, would you pray with me? Creator, God, sustainer of all, we love you.

We need you. We welcome you in this place. We ask that you would speak to our hearts, open our minds, fill our bodies, renew our spirits this morning.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So we have been in Exodus 3 the past couple of weeks looking at the beginning of the story of Moses and the burning bush, sort of concentrating on verses 1 through 8.

So we're going to continue starting with verse 9. This is God speaking to Moses. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

[5 : 13] And God said, I will be with you, and this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

So God has spoken directly to Moses with a very specific call. Go. And not just go, but go back to your people where you came from.

Speak to power for their release and then lead them out of slavery to freedom. Sometimes the call is a lot. And Moses is like, surely you don't mean me, God.

But God did mean him specifically and exactly because of who Moses was and the ways God was looking to form him more deeply.

Ways God was looking to bring clarity to Moses' cloudiness. And what had been the cloudiness for Moses? Well, a lot of it was connected to his very identity.

[6 : 20] Born Hebrew, part of an oppressed people, hidden for the first three months of his life by his mother to keep him alive. Adopted then by Pharaoh's daughter, the oppressors.

Returned to be nursed by his own mother until he was weaned. We don't know exactly how long that was. Some accounts say until maybe two, some more, some less. To then be returned to live as Pharaoh's daughter.

I mean, Pharaoh's daughter's son. His little life before he was probably even five years old was filled with a lot of trauma. And as he grows up, we know that he has a sense of who his people are, the Hebrews.

In Exodus chapter 2, he witnesses his people being abused. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and Moses, enraged, goes on to kill that Egyptian.

We also see him moved when he sees two of his people fighting with each other and he confronts them about that. Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew, he asks in verse 13 in chapter 2.

[7 : 27] But Moses is also growing up in a palace as a prince with the Egyptians and Pharaoh's daughter as his mom.

He's definitely not going through the enslavement, violence, or the oppression that his people are. He's not fully accepted by the Hebrews and deep down, he knows that he's not part of the Egyptians either.

There is a lot of confusion about who he truly is and where he fits, along with probably a bunch of other emotions underneath the surface that at this point he's not confronting directly but are definitely coming out in various harmful ways.

His anger regarding his circumstances and what his people are going through, probably along with feelings of guilt, shame, longing, and so much more are all there underneath.

Pharaoh finds out about Moses killing the Egyptian and tries to kill Moses and so Moses leaves it all, fleeing to a foreign land, the land of Midian.

[8 : 33] And 40 years go by. Moses is now still in Midian. He's got a wife and kids and, you know, he spends his time tending to his father-in-law's sheep.

It's an ordinary day, but this extraordinary thing is happening. This bush is on fire, but it's not burning up. And God is calling to Moses to go back to all of what he left 40 years ago.

What is God doing here? How is this call offering clarity to Moses around what he's been unclear about for much of his life?

In the book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, written by Ruth Haley Barton, she answers these questions with this response. God called to Moses out of the burning bush, saying, in effect, I know the question about your identity has been a little confusing for you, but I have always known who you are.

You are a Hebrew. No matter where you live, no matter who raised you, no matter how anyone tries to beat it out of you, no one can take that away from you.

[9 : 47] I believe some of us needed just that word today. But Barton continues, You know what it is to be displaced. You know what it is to live your life on someone else's terms, to see the injustice of it all and want to do something about it.

In the very essence of your being, you are someone who is not willing to let injustice go unanswered. Your care for your people and their well-being is deep and genuine.

Now that you know who you are, I am calling you to do something out of the essence of your being. You have submitted to the rigors of the wilderness. Come now and I will send you to Pharaoh so

that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.

Ruth Haley Barton says that it is in this time that Moses is becoming clear that his calling was inextricably interwoven with his human situation and his personal identity.

All of the parts of himself were becoming aligned, both through what he had gone through and faced about who he was in the wilderness of Midian and now in how God was calling his full self into use.

[11 : 04] Barton says that his passion for his people and the strong sense of justice that had caused his violent outbursts back in Egypt lay at the heart of what God was now asking him to do.

Even though his violent reaction to the injustice that he had witnessed had been terribly wrong, the incident itself was not irrelevant and arose from something real within him. And what I love about this is I don't feel like she's saying, you know, Moses was bad and he was angry and that anger wasn't good and God had to get rid of it before he could be used.

I see this as saying Moses in the core of his being was deeply feeling, moved by injustice. His anger now looked at, faced, investigated, refined in that wilderness space of Midian.

No longer hidden or denied or buried in shame was one of the very things God saw as good and useful in Moses now being able to carry out what God was asking him to do.

But to get there, Moses had to get real about what was within him. And it begs the question, what is real within us, within you?

[12 : 18] How might God want to bring clarity to who you are through your calling? Are we open to the rigors of the wilderness, of doing the deep dive to get to who we really are?

Conundrum number one is that when it comes to those calls that are specifically for us as individuals, they are linked to who we really are and sometimes we haven't done the work to fully know ourselves and face our deepest parts.

And family, we can place blame in a lot of areas for this, like seriously, starting with the church.

Many of us were taught through church that all we needed to be concerned about was just knowing God.

That that should be our only focus, like God didn't create us as unique individuals with, you know, individual DNA and unique giftings and talents and backgrounds and histories for a reason.

And then there is the world to blame, society. Society conditions us so well into false and partial versions of ourselves. Systems of domination and oppression are real and they impact us in deep ways, ultimately disconnecting us from each other and our truest selves.

[13 : 34] Literally dismembering who we really are and luring us to put on these like uniforms to survive in the matrix and keep the system going.

You know what I'm saying? But we must remember who we really are. And no matter who is to blame, it is our responsibility as adults to do our work, to dive deep, to literally remember ourselves, put ourselves and allow God to put us back together so that we can claim our full identity and move from that place and the purposes God has for us.

So one of the ways we live a life worthy of the calling is by uncovering our who. The process, though not always easy, is for our good and can be soul full, soul stirring, soul watering.

In the coming weeks, Pastor Anthony is going to talk to us more about the how of this process, so stay tuned for that. But maybe you've done or are doing your deep dive and there's still a disconnect for you.

Let's go back to Moses. Moses gets this big call in Exodus 3, verse 10, and in verse 11, we see him say to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

[15 : 02] Moses seemed to think that he was maybe not enough something or too much of something else. Conundrum number two in connection with calling is not feeling worthy, whatever the call is.

For the rest of the chapter and most of the next one, Moses spends his time arguing it out with God, trying to convince God that he is not the one to carry out this call and naming multiple reasons why he's not.

He doesn't think he's worthy to lead the charge and go up against Pharaoh. He doesn't think the Israelites will listen to him. He doesn't think that they will believe that it's their God who sent them.

He goes so far as even to suggest that the way his speech is and the way his mouth works isn't worthy enough, to which God reminds him in Exodus chapter 4, verse 11.

And I'm paraphrasing here. I made your mouth, boo. Moses lays out fear after concern, after hesitation, after pushback, all rooted in the unworthiness he felt in relation to this call. And at every turn, God, our good God, reassures Moses of God's presence, God's power, and God's goodness. I'll be with you, God says in verse 12.

[16:28] I am who I am, God says in verse 14. I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders, God says in verse 20. Who gave human beings their mouths?

I will help you speak and teach you what to say, verses 11 and 12 in chapter 4 of Exodus. God reminds Moses that he made him, knows him, and he has not made a mistake choosing him for this moment.

We live a life worthy of the calling by trusting this, trusting that God made us, knows us, and will be with us through it all. And this can take some time and then some more time, like a lifelong practice, actually, of leaning deeper and deeper into trust of God.

And God meets us there and offers us love in our wavering and in our unease. And as we see here, sometimes it can take arguing with God.

God can handle it. This is also where leaning into trusted community can be really important.

Having folks around you who can remind you of your worthiness and reflect back to you the beauty of who you are while also encouraging you to grow beyond where you are now, to trust God more, to release fear, to let yourself be more fully formed.

[18:01] Are we being that kind of community with and for each other? In Black liturgies, Cole Arthur Riley says in her liturgy on selfhood, I know who I am.

The sound is unmistakable. The question is, am I safe enough? Am I well enough? Am I loved enough to be able to admit it? We need safe places to confront the gaps in our worthiness and practice trusting God.

But what if worthiness isn't our issue? Maybe we've done the deep dive, we've done some healing, we're, you know, feeling pretty good about ourselves most days, but we're not hearing, feeling, sensing the call.

Our final conundrum when it comes to calling is not feeling like you have one. And this can create a lot of pressure and doubt, particularly if you've grown up in a religious environment that made it seem like God had a specific call for every moment of your life, including 1 p.m.

and on Tuesday and in August and definitely when you're 33 and like, you know, forever. But I love the story that Barbara Brown Taylor shares in her book *An Altar in the World* about trying to discover her call.

[19:27] She shares that when she was young, she thought that there was just one specific thing that she was supposed to do with her life, that God had a purpose for her and her main job was to discover what it was.

And she talks about being in seminary where all of the other students seemed to know exactly what their purpose was, their call, but that she didn't have a single clue. So she begins to pray about it, even finding the perfect to her prayer place, which was up high at the top of this fire escape next door to the Divinity School.

She says, I went up there so many times in the weeks that followed that I no longer remember which night it was that God finally answered my prayer. I do not think it was right at the beginning when I was still saying my prayers in words.

I think it came later when I had graduated to Incoit Sounds. Up on that fire escape, I learned to pray the way a wolf howls. I learned to pray the way that Ella Fitzgerald sang scat.

Then one night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God what I was supposed to do with my life, God said, anything that pleases you.

[20:45] What? I said, resorting to words again. What kind of an answer is that? Do anything that pleases you, the voice in my head said again, and belong to me.

Sometimes God lets us choose because it's not always about the what of it, but about the how. How are we going about our lives? Is it with love? Is it with honesty? Is it with stewarding power well?

Is it with grace? Regardless of if God has given us a very specific thing to do, like Moses, or if God is telling us to choose, our collective call as followers of Jesus is to belong to God, to walk in the way of Jesus, loving God, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And this understanding actually connects to the core of what calling is. The verb to call refers to the capacity living creatures have to call out to one another, to stay connected, to communicate something of importance.

[22 : 02] Calling is highly relational. It's supposed to draw us toward one another, draw us toward love, toward life, toward liberation, which is why the concept of calling misconstrued, mishandled, misused, is so damaging.

As mentioned earlier, I'm sure some of us have had the painful experience of being on the other side of someone's calling. There have been several, a person apparently called to tell me to repent from being queer and come back to Jesus, but I never left.

Accepting my sexuality brought freedom for me, brought me closer to God, brought life and life more abundant, brought that woman right there. God is never going to call anyone to tell us something that harms us or causes death, death of our spirits, of our emotions, of our hearts, of our bodies.

Ephesians 4 urges us to not take calling lightly. In verses 1 through 5, it says, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

[23 : 37] There is one body and one spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. We live a life worthy of the calling not always through a specific what, but through being intentional about our how.

Holding on to this has also been a balm to me at times when I have felt very clear actually about my what, but the circumstances conducive to me carrying it out have completely shifted out of my control.

New boss, new administration, new president, sudden job loss, traumatic relationship change, housing insecurity, bank account dwindling.

I have honestly experienced all of those things at various times in my life. and it can lead to feeling very lost and frustrated and helpless and at times hopeless.

But God sees you, family. God sees us. Your cries, just like those of the Israelites in verse 9, are also reaching God.

[24 : 54] God has not forgotten about you. the desires in your heart matter to God and a way through this current wilderness that you might be in right now is coming.

But in the waiting, try not to undervalue the moments during this time that you can still lean into the how of our collective call as Jesus' people.

The ways that you can still show love to yourself and to neighbor. It matters big. So much so that Jesus named it as the second greatest commandment in Matthew 22, 39.

Love your neighbor as yourself. The first being to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is our collective call as Christians.

So calling, whether individual or collective, specific, or more general, is meant to form us more deeply in the ways of Christ.

[26 : 05] Calling is meant to bring clarity to who we are. It is always relational, connecting us more wholly to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

And it's meant to bring life and liberation. Living lives worthy of the call is not always easy. It's just not. But it also doesn't always have to feel awful.

Like, sometimes uncovering who we really are and connecting with our worthiness means reconnecting with our childlikeness, playing, giving in to abandon, being curious, paying attention to what brings us delight, what cracks us up, what makes us feel truly alive, taking us back to those moments before we started putting on the uniform.

But ultimately, living a life worthy of the calling means being who we really are, but also trusting God to make us more than we can envision.

would you pray with me? An unraveling prayer from Rebecca Wilson.

[27 : 26] Beloved designer, weaving all creation together, holy, fabulous are you and our unique patterns.

Fill us with the desire to accurately value, lovingly embrace, and tenderly care for our beauty and our worth as you do. Reveal to us all we seek and even more.

Deliver to us these gifts beyond our imagination. Guide us to curiously hold and gently examine the intricate fabric of our being and our flesh.

Lead us from doubt, fear, and shame to a never-dimming light, reflecting the majestic fullness of who and what we are. Amen.

Man. Man. Thank you.