

If We Are Willing, God Is Able

Betty Jane and I didn't get enough sleep this past week for a very simple reason: We've been watching the Olympics being broadcast from Beijing. And why have we been losing sleep watching the Olympics? I'm not sure, but I think there is more to it than a fascination with women in bikinis playing beach volleyball!

Partly, I think, it is national pride. Some of our Olympic champions have been outstanding. Did I mention our women's beach volleyball team? And there was also Michael Phelps who won eight gold medals for swimming and 41 year old Dara Torres who won a silver medal for the U.S. women. It was amazing to see Nastia Liukin and Shawn Johnson, win silver and gold in the all around women's gymnastics, especially since the Chinese were so powerful. The U.S. men's beach volleyball team of Dalhausser and Rogers also won a gold medal. It is good to see fellow Americans doing great things.

But beyond the bikinis and national pride, there is also a fascination with seeing athletes of all nations doing amazing things with their bodies. It's amazing to see their perseverance, their determination, the results of many years of training and discipline. It's inspiring to watch people overcome obstacles to achieve success. And even though, you nor I will ever compete in the Olympics games, we all do compete in the Olympic-like challenges of life. And, we are all invited by the example of our Olympic athletes to run our races valiantly and are encouraged to believe that we can do more than we might otherwise believe.

This ties in with this year's Vacation Bible School theme about being God's heroes. Their memory verse for the week was Philippians 4:13, which was: (does anyone still remember?) "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Actually, we have seen some examples of overcoming obstacles and doing some pretty amazing things here at Fourth Street recently. We had fears going into the outreach at Fairview Hills, but believing in God and working together with one another, we carried out that mission. We had fears about raising money for the new heating system; but, with God's help, the money is coming in. Leann had some misgivings about this year's Vacation Bible School, but we had one of the best experiences in many years. I was worried about removing the church radiators but we succeeded in taking them out without anyone getting hurt. I was concerned about removing the old furnaces from the church, but I stuck my head in the boiler room Thursday night only to see that they had disappeared. I had some misgivings about today's

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spaghetti dinner, but now it smells like a great success. I think we are on a roll!

But I can't help feeling that all of this is just practice and that there is a larger ministry on the horizon. As our Vacation Bible School theme told the children, we are all called to be heroes for God. God does have a mission for us to accomplish, and I know some things about this mission: It is a mission that is extremely important (it will mean the difference between heaven and hell for many people). It is a mission that will take faith, courage, obedience, and perseverance to accomplish, and it is a mission that we cannot accomplish in our own strength or wisdom. It's also a mission that will make our lives worth living and, in the end, bring us great joy.

In a spiritual sense, our mission is very much like the mission God gave Moses in our Scripture lesson for this morning. We pick up the story in Exodus 3:1-7: Verses 1-3 say: "Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up."

The first thing we see in this Scripture is that God got Moses' attention. That's always the first thing that has to happen to us before we will be able to hear and respond to God's call upon our lives. God gets people's attention in many different ways. Sometimes it's through something unusual, like a bush on fire that doesn't burn up, or an uncanny coincidence. Sometimes it's a serious illness or a close brush with death either in your life personally or in the life of someone close to you. Sometimes it's an unexpected blessing. Sometimes it comes on the heels of a great failure or personal loss. Sometimes it's a miracle or answered prayer. Sometimes it's a dream or a vision. Sometimes it's an idea that won't let you rest or a word of Scripture or a line in the pastor's sermon that seems like it was written just for you. The possibilities here are limited only by the imagination of God, so in fact there are no limits to the ways God uses to get our attention. I wonder this morning: Has God ever gotten your attention? Maybe He is getting your attention right now, at this very moment? In one way or another, God will capture our attention.

The second thing we see in our Scripture today is that Moses perceived that God was speaking to him. In Moses' case it would appear that he heard an audible voice: Verses 4-6a say, "When the

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LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God."

Once God gets our attention, His intention is to communicate to us and to establish a relationship with us. He wants us to come to know who He is. God wanted Moses to know that the God who spoke to him was holy and that He was the same God who had spoken to Moses' ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God revealed Himself to Moses, and what comes next is a crucial step in the process: Moses believed.

Now I say this is a crucial step in the process because Moses didn't have to believe. He could have blamed the whole thing on heatstroke. He could have considered it to be an hallucination or some trick being pulled on him by Jethro or one of his sons. He might have attributed it to having a nervous breakdown, or perhaps it was something he ate or smelled. Moses could have said, "that was weird," and then walked away.

Instead, Moses took his encounter with God seriously. He believed and because he believed he humbled himself. The last part of verse 6 says, "At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." I wonder this morning how many here today have ever had a good case of holy goose bumps? I wonder how many of you have at some point realized you were standing on holy ground and were afraid because you believed God was present? Moses believed and was afraid because of the exceeding nearness and holiness of God.

God got Moses' attention and spoke to him. Moses believed and feared and humbled himself in God's presence. After that, something truly extraordinary takes place: God shared His heart. Look at verse 7: "The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."

The thing we need to understand from this is that God's heart hasn't changed. God cared about the sufferings of the Israelites when they were held as slaves in Egypt and God cared about the sufferings of the people when Jesus walked on earth in human flesh. In fact, that's why Jesus came to earth in human flesh. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in

Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

The Bible tells us that God cares for hurting, addicted, and oppressed people. All people are precious in His sight and God has prepared a way for their healing, forgiveness, and deliverance. Verses 8 and 9 of Exodus 3 record God’s message to Moses, “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.” God cares for His people in their distress.

God gets our attention and reveals Himself to us. Then, if we believe in Him and humble ourselves before Him, He will share with us His heart for us and for others. Then He will unveil His plan, the mission that will revolutionize our lives and the lives of those around us. Notice Exodus 3:10: God says to Moses, “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” “Egypt” was a place of bondage and oppression for God’s people. It was also a place of idolatry and hedonistic pleasures.

The biblical “Egypt” stands as a symbol for the bondage of people today. Many people today are enslaved by sin, addicted to the pursuit of worldly success, wealth, power, pleasure, and recognition.

I felt bad for the young American diver who burst into tears because she didn’t do well enough to get into the gold medal round at the Olympics and for the American runner who was bitter he got silver rather than gold. People need to know, someone has to tell them, that the applause of heaven is worth far more and lasts infinitely longer than the applause of earth. The glory of winning a gold medal at the Olympics or gaining wealth or acquiring status in society is fleeting. The glory of knowing God’s love and His forgiveness lasts for eternity.

Our task as God’s people today is similar to the task given to Moses. We are called to invite and to lead people from their bondage and want in Egypt to freedom and abundance in Jesus Christ. And, here we begin to feel some resistance. Notice Moses’ reaction to God’s call. Exodus 3:11 says, “But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’” It’s at this point that the man who has just experienced the presence of God, discovered the identity of God, glimpsed the heart of God, and heard the voice of God, begins to fight with God. As we read down through the rest of Exodus 3, we see Moses offering a list of excuses worthy of the worst of us.

Moses questioned his own credentials and abilities. He questioned his powers of communication. He questioned the willingness of the people to follow his leadership and the willingness of Pharaoh to obey God’s command. Moses bellyached and bargained, but God answered his every objection. And, the bottom line answer was this: In Exodus 3:12 God says, “I will be with you.”

The thing is, God wants to use us to declare His freedom to the people all around us who are living in bondage to values and lifestyles that are making them miserable keeping them separated from God and His true plan and purpose for their lives. We hear His call to this mission, but like Moses we begin with our list of excuses. Lord, don’t you have anybody else? And God says, “I will be with you.” If you are willing I will give you everything else you need. I will give you power. I will give you the words to say or a translator to speak for you. I will make the people believe you and Pharaoh obey you. If you are willing, I am able. Nothing can stand in your way. As Jesus put it: “On this rock I will build my church and (even) the gates of hell will not be able to stand against it.”

In closing this morning, I want to suggest to you and remind you that a central part of showing our love for God and care for people is to be equipped, and to allow ourselves to be used, in bringing other people into a living relationship with Jesus Christ and with His Church.

Pray for the people within your sphere of influence. Ask God for opportunities and courage to witness, to have conversations with them about Him. Follow His leading in inviting others to come with you to worship, Sunday School, and Bible Studies. Here’s your chance to win something more valuable than silver or gold. Here’s your chance to win someone else to Christ and to gain the applause of heaven.

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Exodus 3:1-11

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