

**3/21/2021**

### **Exodus 3:1-11 NLT**

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn't burn up. "This is amazing," Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it."

When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

"Here I am!" Moses replied.

"Do not come any closer," the Lord warned. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord told him, "I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt." But Moses protested to God, "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?"

### **A Testimony: My Call to Vocational Ministry**

So you might have noticed that today's scripture lesson and sermon title do not fit with the sermon series that we've been going through called "The Big Picture" where we've been learning about the major chronological themes in the Bible, all beginning with the letter "C." Well, when I had planned out the sermon series a few months ago, I had thought I planned

out the weeks in perfect timing to fit with our church calendar with our special days like Palm Sunday...but as I revisited how the themes were falling in line with the church calendar, they didn't quite match up. So we'll be looking at the C word "Christ" next week, which also happens to be Palm Sunday, and then "Cross" on Maundy Thursday.

So since I moved some things around so late in the game, I had a gap to fill with some other topic. You all have heard me talk about my journey of ordained ministry with my interviews happening just last week and some of you helped with a site visit with the board of ordained ministry last month. And for a few weeks now I've been doing a lot of reflecting about God's faithfulness to lead me through and to this place in my call to ministry. And as I have been reflecting, I thought to myself, "You know what, I wonder if my church folks wonder about why I decided to follow a call to full-time ministry, and so it seems fitting to share with you all a bit of my story as a testimony to how our Lord has worked in my life.

When thinking back over the experience of my call to ministry, I would say the two words that come to mind the most are "doubt" and "denial." Yep, not much romantic about it...I doubted my call pretty much every step of the way.

I was raised in my grandparents' home and lived with them and my mother until late high school when my mom married the man I now call my dad. Throughout my childhood we were **at the church so much**, sometimes more than our own home during certain seasons of the year. My mom was the choir director, she was on various committees, and she was the drama director of the passion play we performed every Holy Week for ten years. I loved being at the church – my friends and family were my church friends and church family. I grew up running through the church halls barefoot and finding the sanctuary to be a safe place for my heart and mind to meet God, even before I was old enough to understand.

My grandma and grandpap were always involved in the church, too. I remember one evening when my grandpap left for a Trustees meeting saying, "I'll just tell them that I'm not going to be chair of the committee again! I've done it long enough." But when he walked in the door later that evening, my grandma and mom stared at him and said, "Well...?" and he replied, "They nominated me again..." with a big eye roll and an embarrassed smirk and we all busted out laughing at him. He loved to serve his church and couldn't help saying "yes" when he was asked to do something.

**My grandpap** was the main father figure in my life since I've never known my biological father and so when my grandpap died unexpectedly while on vacation at the age of 69, my whole family was in shock. My little 8<sup>th</sup> grade heart and mind didn't know how to cope with such a big loss and so during the funeral home visitation as hundreds of people came through the doors to pay their respects to my grandpap and our family, I did what I knew how to do – I visited with people. I talked with people. I did my best to stand up straight and be strong for my grandma and mom. I remember only fragments of those long evenings of visiting with the mile-long line of neighbors who came to say, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

**But there's** one piece of those evenings that will be stuck in my memory forever. At the end of the final night of visitation at the funeral home, my pastor was there to be with us and provide support. It was just my immediate family in the funeral parlor and the night was wrapping up when my pastor said to me, "**Tori, Have you ever thought about being a minister?**" And with the most flabbergasted look I have maybe ever made in my life I burst out in a nervous laughter and said, "Hahahaha, **no way!!!!**" He calmly replied, "Well, you should," and continued to explain how he thought it was so strange and impressive that a 13 year old could visit and show hospitality and grieve with people as if she were many years older. I

was just doing what I thought people did at funerals, but my pastor had the eyes to see gifts in me that God had planted and was growing. And that was the start of the next 15 years journeying to become “Pastor Tori.”

From then on, throughout high school I always had “Pastor” in the back of my mind when I thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up, but it took me a long time to actually think I could be one. Junior year of high school arrived and I needed to start applying to schools and looking into majors. I remember one evening when I was really distraught about what to do with my future and my mom sat down with me at the kitchen table and we thought through what my passions were and what I was good at. By the end of that conversation I was...kind of certain... I wanted to be a pastor. There was still so much doubt in my mind about if I could do this job that I respected so much.

**A year went by** and I decided to go to Edinboro University. I started out at Edinboro with a Philosophy – Religious Studies major, but quickly realized that it was not for me. Not only was the material a bit too lofty and dry for my 18 year old brain, but the Philosophy professor (who also happened to be my advisor) was pretty hostile toward Christian students in his classes. I never attempted to publicly bring the Christian perspective

into class discussions, but other fellow Christian freshman gave it a shot and it always ended the same way – the 18 or 19 year old student would be publicly humiliated by the 50 or 60 something professor who had devoted their career to studying the philosophical debates of humanity. It wasn't fun or helpful and so I left the Philosophy department for the English department.

Also at Edinboro I did find a lot of Christian friends, one among them actually is Allyson Sarring who is now a campus minister at Edinboro with Chi Alpha and also someone who this church has supported financially for years now, even before I got here! I was amazed when I found that out.

I found many Christian friends and as I got to know them all I began sharing what I wanted to do as a career – be a pastor – thinking I'd find more understanding among them than I did with the larger secular Edinboro University population. (Side note: usually when I said I wanted to be a pastor to friends who weren't familiar with the Church, I would usually either hear an "oh..." and the subject would quickly move on to something more comfortable to talk about, OR I would be asked "Oh, you want to be nun?" Yeah, I've found out that saying you're pastor is a great way to kill a conversation.) Anyway, walking to Butterfield Hall with one of my friends on

a crisp fall morning I heard my friend offer these shocking words to me, “I just want you to know that my church and I don’t believe in women being pastors.” And with that sentence and many following conversations about this topic, my world was flipped inside out and upside down.

Those conversations with my friends who held this belief and through many other tearful conversations with my mentors and other pastors, I eventually came to learn and believe that women can and are called to be ministers in the Church. But it about 2 years for my faith to get sorted out about this topic and some others that were being challenged by this group of Christian friends. I had never heard of this particular belief about women before (remember I grew up with a single mother who could do anything she set her mind to) and I had been encouraged for years by many in the Church by this point that I had gifts and graces and a calling on my life to become a pastor. However, it seemed like my friends who held this belief about women had scriptural evidence for their convictions. I was so confused and disoriented, and tempted to think I had believed in a hoax all this time. *What if* women shouldn’t be pastors...if that was true, what would I do?

At the end of my 4 years at Edinboro I had to write a thesis paper, and in God's great humor, I got to write my Literature thesis paper on *the Bible!* Yeah, it was awesome. Since I was an English Literature major, and since the Bible is literature...I got to write my paper on how Jesus and the Apostle Paul actually supported and encouraged women to be ministers of the Gospel. The experience of researching and writing that thesis paper was truly life changing...but...even though I had developed a firm belief that *women* can and are called to be pastors, I still wasn't sure (like really wasn't sure) if I, Tori, was called to be a pastor. I doubted and denied that call, still.

Fast forward to after my first semester of grad school at Asbury Seminary near Lexington, Kentucky. I loved my first semester. I loved learning about Church history and "Inductive" Bible study...but by the time Christmas break rolled around, I still wasn't sure if "pastor" was a title I wanted before my name (and I was *in* seminary!!!). I came home for Christmas break and was asked by Pastor Ron Geisler at Christ UMC in Millcreek if I would preach for him while he was on vacation during the first week in January. He asked me to preach on my call to ministry and I said, "sure!" while thinking "ugh!" By this time I had written seminary application essays and scholarship application essays and ministerial candidacy

essays on my call to ministry...and truly I hated talking about it because deep down in my heart I wasn't sure if I was called to pastoral ministry. I said I was, but I didn't know if I believed that. I still wasn't sure if God was actually calling me to ministry or if it was just what I thought I "should" do or "have" to do since nothing else interested me. I still doubted if I could or wanted to do it.

Well, while preparing for that sermon that Pastor Ron asked me to give, I planted myself at the Tim Horton's on West 26<sup>th</sup> street in Erie and searched the scriptures to find something to share with the people at Christ UMC. Slowly but surely, God brought the narrative of Moses to my eyes and heart and showed me how I was being so much like Moses who doubted his abilities, was in denial about God's call on his life, and who tried to (in the scriptures that follow today's reading) wiggle his way out of God's calling. Moses made up all kinds of excuses and in a last ditch effort said outright to God, "Lord, just find someone else!" But in the end, Moses relented and served God. Isn't it amazing that the person in all of the Old Testament with the most pivotal, history changing role in the story of the Jewish people – leading them out of Egyptian slavery – didn't even want to do it in the first place...and tried his hardest to say no? I found that and still find that so comforting.

I ended up preaching that Sunday at Christ UMC on this very scripture reading that we heard earlier, and something weirdly and miraculously happened in my heart that day. Through the act of preaching that sermon on my continual doubt and stubborn denial, God's Spirit worked in my heart in a way I can't explain. After preaching that sermon, I had a newfound confidence in my call so much that I finally felt like I could claim this call as my own. No longer was it something I felt like I should do or had to do, but it was something I *wanted* to do! And so for the very first time, one semester *into* seminary, 8 years after the initial suggestion from my pastor that I should think about being a minister, I finally, *finally* said "yes" to God to follow his call on my life. It took long enough, but with God's patience and mercy despite all my doubting and denial, I got there. And I got here.

The chapter of my call story that's still being written today is the chapter called Waterford. When I first arrived here in 2019 I was certain you all weren't too sure about me, but what you didn't know was that I wasn't too sure about this whole *actually being* a pastor thing. Finally doing the job I worked toward for so long was exciting but intimidating and scary oftentimes. There's SO MUCH about being a pastor they don't teach you in seminary, and I'm just glad I had like 9 months here before we all took the

class together called “How to live through a global pandemic.” I wish we would have had some warning we were taking that class, though, right?

From the bottom of my heart I want to thank you for your patience and kindness you have brought throughout the first two years of us getting to know each other, doing ministry together, and still being the Church through Covid together. I know of other churches and pastors who have not fared so well through the last year, and I’m beyond grateful for this community of saints.

I’m so amazed at how our God works. God’s loving patience and mercy through we human’s doubts and denials, our Lord still finds a way to bring grace and beauty out of the good and the bad, the easy and the difficult parts of our life’s journey. And so I’m here today to say to you, because I know first-hand, that you can run from God’s calling on your life, you can be unsure about what God’s calling you to do, and you can even live in denial until you’re ready to say “yes,” but saying “Here I am, Lord. I’ve heard you calling and I will go” is the best thing you could do.

Each of us has a calling on our lives. Mine just happened to be a calling to full-time ministry as my vocation. What’s your calling? What does God have for you to do? Is it ministry? Is it being a friend to the friendless?

Is it giving hope to people who are hopeless? Is it being a witness of God's love as a teacher? Or a hair stylist? Or a mom or dad? Or a roofer? Or a grandparent? Or a nurse? Or a boss? Or a cashier? How is God calling you today? **Your call** story is still being written. How will you answer God today?

Let's pray --