



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017  
THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Who, Me?  
Exodus 3:1-15; I Peter 2:1-10

You may have seen the CBS News story early last month which profiled a young man who had applied for a rather high level position with NASA. The story gained a lot of interest because the position being offered by NASA was one enticingly titled “planetary protection officer” and the applicant was a nine year-old boy named Jack Davis from New Jersey. Upon learning of the position, young Mr. Davis submitted a hand-written application which stated:

Dear NASA,

My name is Jack Davis and I would like to apply for the planetary protection officer job. I may be nine but I think I would be fit for the job. One of the reasons is my sister says I am an alien also. I have seen almost all the space movies and alien movies I can see. I have also seen the show “Marvel Agents of Shield” and hope to see the movie *Men in Black*. I am great at video games. I am young, so I can learn to think like an alien.<sup>1</sup>

Even if he never learns to “think like an alien,” Jack Davis certainly possesses abundant confidence and bravado for the job. What a contrast this young man is to Moses whom we find standing before a burning bush at the foot of Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.<sup>2</sup> Granted, at nine years old, Jack Davis might be a bit naive about his abilities. Moses, a fully grown man, well knows the risks of taking on his adoptive grandfather the Pharaoh. Still, there is a tremendous difference in confidence. Not at all deterred by his age or whatever the requirements of the job might be, Jack Davis is ready to take on, not only the world, but the entire universe! Moses, on the other hand, is anything but confident and the last thing he wants to do is to travel back to Egypt and lead his people to freedom.

Certainly there are times when we are over-confident and think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but I suspect that there are many more

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<sup>1</sup>Justin Carissimo, “9-year-old “Guardian of the Galaxy” Applies to Be Nasa's Planetary Protection Officer,” *CBS News* (August 5, 2017); available online at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jack-davis-nasa-planetary-protection-officer/>.

<sup>2</sup>The connection between these two stories was inspired by a devotion by Dr. Tracey Jessup, Senior Minister to the University, Gardner-Webb University, *Monday Mornings Devotional* (August 28, 2017).

occasions when we feel insecure and inadequate to take on the task that is before us, perhaps even a task assigned by God.

Moses makes some familiar arguments to God's invitation to become the leader of the Hebrew people. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Behind the obvious irony of a shepherd demanding that Pharaoh grant freedom to his workforce was also the reality that Moses had fled Egypt as a fugitive after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew man. He had reason not to want to go back. He also stated the obvious: "If I go to Pharaoh and make this demand, who am I to say sent me? I don't even know your name!" To which God replied, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM has sent me to you."

Moses figured he was getting nowhere in this strange conversation with a burning bush. What he lacked in confidence, he more than made up in excuses. He took a deep breath and complained that no one would believe him and would think he made up the whole story of God speaking from a burning bush. So God gave Moses a few tricks to perform: a staff that could turn into a snake and back again, the ability to make his hand leprous and then cure it, and the grand finale of dipping ordinary water from the Nile which would turn into blood when poured upon the ground. Surely in a superstitious place like Egypt, such tricks would convince them that Moses acted on behalf of some divine being.

Nevertheless, Moses was reticent to take on the task. "I'm not an eloquent speaker," he muttered. I sputter and stammer and trip up over all my words. I could never even convey your message to Pharaoh. Losing patience, God said, "You have a brother named Aaron who is a good speaker. He will go with you. End of discussion!" And Moses reluctantly packed his bag and headed back to Egypt (Exodus 4).

While there are some people among us who are as confident as Jack Davis, most of us have at least a measure of Moses within us. We are insecure and feel unprepared and inadequate to do the things we suspect God wants us to do. Especially in our world today when so many opinions fly back and forth about political, social, and faith issues, we hardly feel competent to express our opinion on such matters. We would rather be tending sheep than discussing how our faith impacts issues of the day. Who are we to speak out?

To us as well, God says, "I AM WHO I AM. I will be with you." There is a measure of trust God expects of us. Just as God did not forget Moses when he fled Egypt after trying to defend a fellow Hebrew, God will not forget

us when we seek to live out our faith in the world. And as God promised to be with Moses when he demanded freedom of the Hebrew people from Pharaoh, God promises to be with us in any task asked of us.

While God may have given Moses a few tricks to amaze and impress Pharaoh and his court, God did not expect him to suddenly have all knowledge or insight into matters of faith. Those things came gradually to Moses as he learned leadership by trial and error in the wilderness. He did not always get it right and more than a few times, Moses upset the people and God. He learned to trust God, however, and he learned what faith in this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was all about.

Faith is a participatory sport. There is no place for someone who wants to do nothing more than sit on the sidelines. We humans learn best over time and with experience. We all need to prepare ourselves for whatever we do. Responding to Jack Davis on behalf of NASA, Planetary Science Director Jim Green, wrote:

I hear you are a 'Guardian of the Galaxy' and interested in being a Planetary Protection Officer. That's great! Our Planetary Protection Officer position is really cool and is very important work. It's about protecting earth from tiny microbes when we bring back samples from the Moon, asteroids and Mars.

We are always looking for bright future scientists and engineers to help us, so I hope you will study hard and do well in school. We hope to see you here at NASA one of these days.<sup>3</sup>

For all of his self-confidence, Jack Davis is not ready to be a planetary protection officer. For one thing, the job involves protecting us from microbes that might cause harm on earth, not from alien invaders. Furthermore, in order to work at NASA, Jack will need a little more education and experience than what he has in the fourth grade. The good news is that, with proper preparation, Jack may well be protecting our planet at NASA one day!

The writer of the Epistle of I Peter understood this issue from a faith perspective. To early Christians facing criticism, skepticism, and persecution, he wrote, "Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation . . ." In other words, we grow into our faith and we mature in our understanding of matters of faith. He goes

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<sup>3</sup>Carissimo.

onto talk about preparing ourselves in the same way we would build a building, with a plan and with proper materials and processes.

As we worship together this morning, Hurricane Irma is howling over Florida. Watching reports and interviews over the past few days, I was surprised at how confident officials are about the buildings in their state. Numerous times I heard people say how much had been learned from previous hurricanes like Andrew and Charley which caused widespread destruction. Building codes were revised and new structures were built which can survive the kind of fury a storm like Irma will throw at them. Other information and procedures were put in place in order to minimize damage and especially to save lives. They learned from their experience. They paid attention to what happened. They built for a stronger, safer, better life together.

In the same way, our faith grows out of our experience. If the structure of our faith is never reinforced or improved to meet the new challenges of the day, it will not be adequate to sustain us in the midst of the storms of life.

How do we rebuild and reinforce our faith throughout life? First, just as we realize that faith has to be lived and exercised day by day, we also understand that it thrives best in company with other believers. Certainly it is possible to be a Christian and live a solitary life, but one who chooses that path will have few resources for growing faith. We need other people to support and encourage us, to challenge and prod us, and to help us explore the questions of faith that arise day by day.

As we often affirm, what we are doing right now is the foundation of our faith. Worship is the most important thing we do as Christians. We come together to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for all of the goodness of life. We unite to share all of the emotions that faith stirs within us: joy, bewilderment, happiness, sadness, grief, anger, emptiness, and fulfillment. We join our voices in prayer. We pool our resources for service. We sing our faith. We bless one another. We explore what God is yet calling us to do in the world. We depart to serve. Worship is important for our faith not only for what we might get out of it but also for what we invest in it. My experience of worship Sunday by Sunday is enriched by your presence and participation. How limited my worship would be if I were the only person in this room each Sunday. I would hear no uplifting anthems to express what my words alone cannot. I would not have the benefit of hearing you affirm things that I hold dear as well. I would not feel your care toward me and one another. I would not experience your commitment to our work through the offering of your gifts and talents. I would not hear your prayers spoken in litanies, hymns, and

silence. Worship is our collective offering of gratitude to God and our preparation for serving God in the days ahead. We worship best together.

Worship is the most important thing we do, but it is not the only thing we do. We also need time to discuss and explore our faith with one another. We have been given a wonderful gift in the scriptures and we all acknowledge it. Most of us also confess that there is much in the Bible that we do not understand. Sometimes our response is simply to leave it on the coffee table and not bother with trying to figure it out. Sometimes we cannot see how the ideas and experiences of people who lived thousands of years ago are relevant today. Yet, we do not take that approach with other areas of life. Most of the things we take for granted in our lives today are possible thanks to the thoughts and work of people who lived long before we appeared on this earth. We study their ideas. We ask questions of their thoughts. We build on their successes and failures. We make new discoveries because of their ancient discoveries.

Our faith needs sharing and talking and exploring. Opportunities such as Sunday School, Bible studies, and other opportunities to ask difficult and important questions of our faith are essential. Our world today is vastly different from when Jesus walked this earth. Our faith, however, holds that Christ is still with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why would we think that God in Christ has nothing further to say to us? If our faith is no longer relevant, then it needs to be placed in a museum and preserved there. If, however, we believe God is still active in the world then our faith needs to be active as well. My faith can grow only if you and I talk about it, struggle through it, rejoice with it, and allow it to interact with this fast changing and fascinating world in which we live. Each one of us needs to take advantage of opportunities to explore our faith.

Worship and study naturally lead us to service which is the offspring of faith. Recognizing how generous God is toward us, our response is to be generous toward one another and the world. Service, in the myriad ways available to us, is the sharing of the Gospel with the world. Through meeting the needs around us, we proclaim boldly that God in Christ is alive and active. Through service, we both honor God and love one another.

Are you a Jack Davis or a Moses? Are you confident and eager but in need of further preparation or are you hesitant and insecure, afraid you are not equipped to do what God asks of you? Or are you, like me, a bit of both? If so, good news! The family of faith exists to worship God, to explore and grow faith, and to serve human need. All resumes accepted. All applicants welcomed!

September 10, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

God of mystery and might, as a people who have once again witnessed the power of creation and who continually experience your power in our lives, we come to worship knowing that the place on which we are standing is holy ground. You are beyond our knowing yet you reveal yourself to us and seek relationship with us. You are beyond our concepts of time and space yet you have worked in human history and continue to act in fresh and relevant ways in us and in our world. You invite us to rest in your grace yet you call us to use our talents and energies as participants in your work of reconciliation. We recognize, Holy God, that every resource of life and relationship, of possession and personality is a part of your marvelous creation and a gift from your generous hand.

God of mercy and wisdom, as a people who have been given so much, we come offering our gifts and ourselves in service. The mystery of our faith teaches us that in giving that we receive and in denying ourselves for the sake of Christ that we find the full and abundant life you have promised. This day, we pray especially for those who have known the destruction of life and property by the forces of wind, water, and fire. We lift up those who, even in this moment, are experiencing Irma's fury. We thank you for the skill and courage of emergency responders and pray for their safety. We pray for wisdom for those officials who are making decisions that will impact the public well-being. We would seek for ourselves a generosity of spirit that we might respond openly and effectively to those who suffer.

In the face of destruction, you call us to build. In the face of violence, you call us to peace. In the face of despair, you call us to hope. In the face of death, you call us to new life, ever relying on your hand to guide us and your love to sustain us. Grant us the compassion required to respond to the overwhelming needs in our world, the courage we will need to follow wherever you call, and grace enough for the journey. We pray this day and every day in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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