

I AM has sent me to you!

(Exodus 3:1–15 NIV) ¹ 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 wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² 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. ³ So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” ⁴ When the 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.” ⁵ “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ 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. 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹² 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.” ¹³ Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’ ” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ ” “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

In Christ Jesus, the God of all mercy and grace, dear fellow redeemed,

One of the many great privileges I have in ministry is to serve on the committee that assigns soon-to-be teachers and pastors to their first fields of service. In fact, right after those assignments are announced, I get to meet with the young men and women assigned to our Northern Wisconsin District of WELS. It’s a joy to watch those young candidates walk into the room, filled with such enthusiasm. They take their seats, I hand them the divine call that our Lord Jesus has given them through the Assignment Committee and suddenly, the room, which a moment earlier was filled with excited chatter, becomes completely silent. The silence is born not of disappointment, but of reverent awe as they ponder the plans God has in mind for them – the same sort of plans that God had in mind for Moses. We’ll consider those plans today under the theme: I AM has sent me to you! 1) to demonstrate his mercy. 2) to proclaim his grace.

In some ways, Moses was like the candidates I meet with, on what has come to be known as Call Day. God had prepared Moses for ministry, placing him in Pharaoh’s household, where he no doubt learned much about leadership. Then God gave Moses some leadership experience, as a shepherd. Of course, at age 80, Moses was considerably older than the 22- and 26-year-olds I meet with. God has prepared these candidates too, with his Word, through a combination of training and practical experience.

We will also note that Call Day was much different for Moses. He was tending his father-in-law’s flock when the angel of the Lord appeared to him from within a bush that was on fire but did not burn up. This angel, who was none other than the Christ long before his birth as the God-man, identified himself as such, announcing to Moses: **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God**

of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” (Exodus 3:6). Any curiosity that Moses was having about the burning bush, instantly gave way to abject fear. God’s presence made the ground that Moses was standing on “holy.” But God’s presence has a very different effect on sinners. God’s holiness threatens to destroy sinners eternally.

Moses realized how unworthy he was. Because of his sin, he was not worthy to see or to serve God. So, when God says to Moses, “...now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people...out of Egypt,” Moses replies, “**Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring these Israelites out of Egypt?**” (Exodus 3:11-12). This is no false sense of humility on the part of Moses. He knows all about the sinful nature he inherited from his parents, and he knows how that nature has shown itself in his sinful thoughts and actions past and present.

You may know that 40 years earlier, while still a member of Pharaoh’s household, Moses decided he was the perfect person to rescue the Hebrews. After all, he was himself a Hebrew in a unique position to help his people. So, on one occasion, when he witnessed an Egyptian master mistreating his Hebrew slave, Moses killed the Egyptian. The next day, when he chided a Hebrew who had picked a fight with another Hebrew, the guilty party said to Moses: “**Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?**” (Exodus 2:14). Word of his sin spread quickly. When Pharaoh found out what Moses had done, he tried to kill him.

Despised by the Hebrews and wanted dead or alive by the Egyptians, Moses became a fugitive. He fled 450 miles to the land of Midian where, in time, he made a new life for himself. He married a woman named Zipporah and went to work for her father, Jethro. Moses’ life in Egypt was ancient history – or so he thought. Sin’s guilt has a way of haunting us sinners, doesn’t it? Satan loves to rub our face in the mud of our misdeeds. He certainly did that to Moses at the burning bush. “Who am I?” Moses cries in response to God’s call to service. Translation: “How can I serve God and his people? I’m a poor, miserable sinner.”

I have to think, that to some degree, the knowledge of one’s own sinfulness has the same chilling effect on all ministry candidates as they hear the voice of God in their call. You’ll understand why as I read from the divine call you issued to me 27 years ago: “*Reposing full confidence in your faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ and in your desire to feed his sheep and lambs, Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church of Appleton, WI herewith, in the name of the Triune God, calls you, Joel M. Zank to be our pastor. We trust that you will recognize in this CALL the voice of your Lord Jesus Christ...*”

“*Reposing full confidence in your faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ.*” What a sobering sentence! I can’t get past the first line of my Call without the need to confess what a failure I am. Faithful? My every sin proves that I’m anything but faithful to Jesus or to you. My failures in life and ministry are too many to count. Do you have a sense of what that feels like? Of course you do! I realize that the majority of you aren’t called to serve in public ministry, but you are all called to be faithful in all the roles God has given you: husband, wife, mother, father, son, daughter, student, employee, employer. Would you count yourself a faithful role model in any of the privileged positions God has given you in life? Or must you hang your head like Moses, like me and cry, “Who am I?”, knowing very well the answer and fearing the consequences that should result from an honest assessment of your life and work? Our God who sends us out there to serve him, should instead be sending us to the outer darkness of hell.

“Who am I?” Moses cried. As you listen to God’s answer, take note of what God did not say to the man he had just called. God did not say, “Oh, dear fellow, you are selling yourself short. You’re being too hard on yourself. Would I ask you to serve if I didn’t see some potential in you? You can do it. You’ve got this!” God says nothing of the sort because none of that is true of Moses or of us. Instead, God says, “**I will be with you.**” (Exodus 3:12). This isn’t about Moses or any of God’s ministers. This is all about our merciful God. The holy ministry is his and he chooses to carry it out, not through perfect messengers such as his holy angels. No, he chooses sinful human beings like Moses, like Matthew, like Paul, like me, like all the pastors and teachers called to serve in this place and throughout God’s church. We are called, not as models of perfection but instead to model, with all our flaws and shortcomings, what God’s mercy makes of unworthy sinners. Each of us must say with the Apostle: “**But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus**

might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:16). I AM has sent me, has sent all our called workers, to demonstrate by our calling the mercy that he shows to us and to you as he pardons our sin, fills us with his faithfulness, and covers us with his Jesus’ holiness. That’s not all! By choosing to work through flawed folks like us, it becomes very evident that what is happening in your hearts and lives as a result of this ministry, is not our doing but that of Christ alone.

God accomplishes his holy work in you through the Word he commissions his ministers to preach and teach to you, a word that highlights, first and foremost, the undeserved love God shows to sinners. In other words, I can say along with all who are called to serve: “I AM has sent me to you to proclaim his grace! “

God’s promise to be with Moses didn’t stop him from offering another excuse as to why he wasn’t the man for the job: **“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exodus 3:13).** Moses is concerned that not only will the people object to his ministry, but perhaps also to his message. These Israelites have been in slavery for hundreds of years. Some, maybe many of them have concluded that God went A.W.O.L., abandoning them long ago. The people may demand to know, “Who is this God who left us here?” What should Moses say to that? **God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”** ¹⁵**God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.” (Exodus 3:14-15).**

“I am” is a form of the name God uses to identify himself as the Lord of free and faithful grace. In this grace he promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would make them into a great people and through them bring to this world, the greatest blessing it has ever known – deliverance, not just from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin. The account of Israel’s exodus from Egypt is a picture of grace that God shows to all of us. God didn’t abandon these people, just as he never abandons us. He’s not some distant, impersonal, being. He’s the Lord who watches over and looks after his people! Of those Israelite slaves, God told Moses: **“I have indeed seen the misery of my people...I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them...” (Exodus 3:7-8).**

I AM has sent me to you to proclaim this same grace. God sees the misery sin brings to your lives. He’s concerned about the guilt that haunts you, and the doubts that plague you every time something goes wrong in your life. He hears your cries. He feels your sorrow. He knows all of it, not as some casual observer, but as the very One who came down to rescue you by taking up your sin as his own, claiming your guilt and carrying to his cross where he suffered the everlasting punishment we all had coming to us. Jesus died to set us free from sin’s curse and then he rose to keep his promise: **“I am the resurrection and the life!” (John 11:25).**

The pastors and teachers you have called to serve you, get to remind you of this truth all the time. We get to assure you that because you are God’s redeemed child, nothing that goes wrong in your life is the result of God’s anger, apathy, or inattentiveness. Your God loves you, is with you, and in life’s lowest moments, he’s working to draw you closer to him and ensure that you will live with him in the Promised Land of heaven forever.

I began by telling you that among the many privileges I have in ministry is that of meeting with the next group of pastors and teachers that God has called into his service. It is a special joy for me when, among their number, are young men and women that grew up right here at Mount Olive. As we hear again today the importance of the ministry, work which God himself promises to bless, it gives each of us good reason to encourage our young people to train for the holy ministry and to pray that God might send them out to demonstrate his mercy and proclaim his grace for the eternal good of many souls and to the unending glory of God’s saving name. Amen.