

The Reluctant Leader

Rich Nathan

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John: Building Hope in a World of Despair

Exodus 3:1-4:17

There is a wonderful biography written about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by David Garrow titled "Bearing the Cross." In this book David Garrow describes the inner struggle that King went through in assuming the leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott.

You obviously know the familiar story of Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a white Montgomery, Alabama bus rider and to move to the back of the bus. She was arrested. This sparked the bus boycott by black citizens of the city of Montgomery in December 1955. Blacks simply became tired of suffering the indignity of having to pay in the front of the bus and then get off and reenter on the back of the bus. Women, especially pregnant women, and the elderly got tired of the indignity of having to give up their seats to healthy, young, white men. So they boycotted.

A pastors' meeting was held and 26-year old Martin Luther King, Jr., a new minister in town, was appointed to lead the boycott. At the time a lot of people thought that King looked more like a boy than a man. He had grown up in very comfortable surroundings in Atlanta with an inherited religion. He certainly did not grow up with the stuff that would suggest he would be the one to lead a great moral crusade that would change the nation.

As soon as King's leadership in the movement was announced, threats by the Ku Klux Klan began. But not only the Klan, within days King was arrested for driving 30 miles an hour in a 25 mph zone and thrown into the Montgomery city jail. For at least the first two months of the boycott King received about 40 telephone calls a day threatening his life. He was overwhelmed by fear.

One night, following his jail experience, King sat in his kitchen wondering if he could take it anymore. He thought about resigning and leaving the city of Montgomery with his family. His wife, Coretta, and his newborn daughter, Yolanda, were asleep in the next room. The telephone rang. King answered it to an angry, threatening voice yelling into the phone, "Blankety blank...we're tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

Here's how Dr. King recalled what happened that night:

As I sat at the table thinking about my little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me at any minute, and as I started to think about a dedicated, devoted, and loyal wife, who was

over there asleep, I got the point where I couldn't take it anymore. I was weak. I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. I bowed down over the cup of coffee. I never will forget it. I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I have to confess that I am weak now. I am faltering. I am losing my courage."

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world." ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying to me fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

Three nights later a bomb exploded on the front porch of King's home filling the house with smoke and broken glass, but injuring no one. King took it calmly.

"My experience with God a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

David Garrow weaves his narrative around that "visitation" at the kitchen table. He comes back to it over and over again for Dr. King came back to it at critical moment in his life. For him, his experience with God became the bedrock of his personal faith. His inherited Baptist religion suddenly became real. And a reluctant leader changed a nation.

A couple of weeks ago a young man who heads up the Christian Legal Society (CLS) at the Ohio State University's College of Law came up to me after a church service. He said, "Rich are you familiar with what's happening at the law school?"

I said, "No, I'm really not." I haven't been in touch with the law school for years.

He said, "Well, there's quite a big controversy. The CLS (of which this young man was the president) has been under attack because we are considering amending our constitution to exclude, among other things, gays from serving in executive committee roles in the CLS."

I said, "I assume that your constitution doesn't simply prohibit gays, but it prohibits anyone who practices sex outside of marriage, heterosexual sex or homosexual sex. And I also assume that you don't prohibit people simply on the basis of status, but on the basis of conduct – they are having sex outside of marriage."

He said, "That's right. What should we do? We're really getting attacked and they are talking about cutting our campus funding. We've been on the front page of the Lantern for several days."

I said, "Well, friend, I don't know if there's a lot you can do. Sometimes you have to hold firm to the principles you believe in. You have an irresistible force meeting an immovable object." I told him I would pray for him.

At pastors' prayer on Tuesday someone at our prayer meeting here at the church said, "Have you heard about what's going on at the law school? The CLS is being threatened with exclusion from the campus because it is alleged that they violated OSU's non-discrimination policy against gays."

I said, "Yes, I heard about that."

He said, "Well, it's really getting pretty heated down there. It's getting ugly."

So we prayed for the leaders to have wisdom and courage. I went back to my office before our staff prayer meeting and I saw that there was a phone message from the Dean of the Law School. I thought, "What's this about?" I called her up.

She said, "Rich, have you heard about what's happening here at the law school?"

I said, "Well, I've heard a little bit. Why don't you fill me in?"

She said, "Well, it is really getting very ugly, very uncivil. There are anti-Christian signs being posted around the law school. There's been some suggestion that there have been some anti-gay signs. Students are in professors' offices in tears. I sent everyone a letter in the law school urging us to adopt a more civil tone. I don't know if that's working. I'd like to have a forum here in which I invite faculty and students to listen to some speakers. What I'd like to do is invite a law faculty member to talk about issues of discrimination. And I also want to invite a law faculty member to discuss the constitutional law issues raised by the CLS's position. And I also wanted to invite in two former students to represent the two competing perspectives. I'd like to invite a student who was here, who was a gay leader at OSU. I also want to invite in an alumnus, who was a Christian leader at OSU."

I knew where this was going. I said, "And...?"

She said, "Well, Rich, I'd like to invite you in to speak to our faculty and students."

I thought, "Oh no. This is a disaster."

I said to the Dean, "Nancy, I've really got to be honest with you. I have to pray about this."

I went to staff prayer and shared the prayer concern. A number of our staff said, "Oh, Rich, do it. This is great. Go out there!"

I said, "Guys, you don't understand. This is an amazingly hostile environment and I

do not want to be mislabeled or have our church mislabeled as 'gay bashing.' This is not something that I want to do. But I'll do it if God is telling me to do it."

I felt like God was setting me up. Because just that morning I was meditating on Exodus 3 and 4, the message that I'm going to give today about the reluctant leader. And I asked the Lord, "Lord, where am I reluctant to do what you are calling me to do? In what situations, God, am I afraid to step out because the opposition seems so great?" And I couldn't think of any situations.

The next morning my devotions were in 2 Tim. 1 where Paul urges young Timothy to never be ashamed of the gospel, or of suffering for Christ. I felt internally that the Lord was directing me through scripture to accept the invitation. Through a series of further phone calls, the forum was set up. And so I spoke down at the law school on Monday afternoon along with the other three forum participants.

Friends, I'll tell you that I don't think the forum could have gone better unless I had done an altar call. There was a graciousness and civility in the room. There was great warmth. That doesn't mean, in any sense, that the battle is over, or that this particular controversy is not going to continue on lots of different fronts. But I had the personal experience this week of God pushing me out of my comfort zone, calling me to do what was uncomfortable, and giving me his presence so that he overcame my reluctance to lead out.

At some point or other, every single human being faces a choice of continuing to step out with God, get off the sides lines and into the game, or to hang back in reluctance and fear. I've called today's talk, "The Reluctant Leader." Exodus 3:1-4:17. Let's pray.

I want to speak today specifically to many of you who may be called to Christian leadership in this church either as a children's ministry leader, a teen leader, a women's leader, a men's leader, a small group leader, a recovery group leader. You have been called to Christian leadership in this church and have been hanging back. I want to address my comments to many of you today in this situation.

You know, the call to Christian leadership often begins by saying, "no" to the world. Moses, like a lot of biblical leaders, was raised in an environment of wealth and privilege. He had a wonderful education like some of you. As the martyr Stephen said in his speech in Acts 7:22:

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Moses was educated in all of the wisdom of the Egyptians.

Do you know that having a significant level of education is a common denominator for many leaders in the Bible? We read of the prophet Daniel and his Jewish friends in Daniel 1:3-4:

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Then the King ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.

The apostle Paul went to the best rabbinic school of his day. He trained as a biblical scholar in Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel. Paul says in Acts 22:3,

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Then Paul said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

The Bible never supports the anti-intellectualism of modern fundamentalist Christianity or some forms of charismatic Christianity. The attitude that you are wasting your time by going to school and getting a good education. Well, that’s just the world’s stuff. What you need to do is study the Bible and read some Christian books.

Students of the Bible do not support the kind of anti-intellectual, hyper-spiritual viewpoint that we find in popular Christianity that says it is OK for you to blow off school or studying so that you can do something more spiritual like fellowshiping or evangelism.

Yes, you need to make time to connect with either Christians. And yes, you need to actively share your faith with those who don’t know Christ in your school. But the Christian faith is not an excuse for poor study habits, or laziness, or being late in completing an assignment, or being a slacker on a project, drifting aimlessly through school without any goals or direction. If you are a student, you are called to learn all you can and to work as hard as you can like Moses, Daniel, and Paul. God will use the foundation of education in your life to equip you for a lifetime of Christian leadership.

Young men and women, how much influence do you want in this world? How much of an impact do you want your life to have? How big of a Christian leader would you like to grow into? Understanding how the world thinks, understanding how the world is structured, understanding and being sensitive to the mindset and philosophic currents of this world is essential for great effectiveness as a Christian leader.

The martyr Stephen said that Moses was educated in all the wisdom of Egypt. Here’s the key. Before Moses was ready to say “yes” to God, he had to say “no” to the world.

SLIDE – Hebrews 11:24-26

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the

sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Notice the verbs. Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses chose to be mistreated. Moses regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as being of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

There comes a point in a woman's life; there comes a point in a man's life when two roads are laid out in front of that woman or man. There is in a woman's life or a man's life a watershed moment when you make a choice to bring your life into conformity to God's eternal purpose regarding why he made you. And the question will be squarely posed to you, friend, will you swim out into the deep end of the pool, step away from your comfort zone, break out of shell, get past your inertia, or will you spend your life splashing around in the kiddie pool convincing yourself that you are actually swimming?

Moses was faced with a choice: the success, pomp and wealth of Pharaoh's court, the privilege and position he enjoyed as a prince, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter; or rather instead would he identify with the slave people of Israel? He weighed it out. He considered the pros and cons.

Every successful person, at least in the world's eyes, will have to face this issue when they sense God's call. Every successful person, every one who has been given some degree of privilege, some degree of education, some degree of popularity, will face the issue squarely and weigh out the pros and cons.

Think about the relative value of what we have in the world and what we could have with God. Moses weighed it out.

I firmly believe that the battle regarding Christian leadership in many lives begins with your willingness and my willingness to say "no" to the world. Christian leadership starts with the recognition that if I do this and if you do this we will be saying "no" to parental expectations, or no to family pressures, or no to peer pressures. If you obey God's call to Christian leadership, you may be saying no to the esteem of your colleagues, or your friends. You may put yourself on the firing line in front of some very powerful forces. You will be forced to identify with the unpopular at times, like Moses who had to identify with a slave people. You may be forced to identify with the unpopular – the pro lifers, the Christians, the people who don't support sex outside of heterosexual marriage, the homeless, folks with AIDS, people in prison, people who are in recovery.

Saying no to the world may include you having to say no to a promotion at work, no to a great career move, no to moving out of the city and accepting another offer out of town, which is the shrewd career move. You say no because God wants you to stay in this church, in this community, for your family's sake, or to continue to challenge you to grow in him. Saying no to the world may mean that you say no to a different job that offers more money because it cuts you off from ministry availability or requires

too much travel. You may have to say no to a former church where you are comfortable, but you are not growing, so that you can be in an environment where you are stretched.

Saying yes to God, friends, almost always involves a very loud no, a no to money, no to a great move, no to greater esteem, no to promotion. Has God asked you to say no to something?

And I have also seen whenever God calls immediately an attractive alternative will present itself. By an attractive alternative I mean a way for you to compromise the call and hold onto success while you convince yourself that you are obeying the call. Over and over I've seen this with the truly called as they're weighing out the call to Christian leadership. Something attractive comes up – an offer of a salary increase, a transfer. In my case, it was the offer of tenure at OSU as an associate professor. And your mind begins to race. How can I say yes to God without saying no to the world? How can I meld these two things?

Have you ever played that game? There comes a point in a woman's life or a man's life where in order to accept the call to Christian leadership you have to say no to the world. There are tons of examples of saying no to the world throughout Christian history. Some of the best examples involve students who chose to engage in world missions.

Back in the 1870's there was an extremely popular cricket player in England named CT Studd. He grew up on a huge estate, attended the best boys' private schools, Eton, and then he went on to Cambridge University. His father had been converted at an evangelistic meeting led by the famous American evangelist DL Moody. He made sure that all of his children were converted.

When CT Studd went to Cambridge, he had all the marks of success. He was England's best cricket player, a great athlete. He was wealthy. He was tall and handsome. Along with six other Cambridge students, CT Studd made a commitment to world missions. These men were known as the Cambridge Seven. They gave up their position, their wealth, all that English aristocratic life had to offer them, to serve first in China, and then Studd ended up in Africa. CT Studd, in fact, gave away his whole inherited estate. He chose to live by faith.

These courageous men were wildly criticized. People said, "What a waste." It is one thing for the poor to ship off to world missions. It's one thing for the maids and the guys working in coalmines, the porters, and the laborers to go to Africa or China. But to give up such a successful career and waste your life and some filthy foreign backwater, what a waste.

May I ask you an affectionate question? Is the Holy Spirit saying to any of you today, "I'm calling you to say no to some aspect of the world so that you can say yes to God?"

As we think about Christian leadership, it is important to remember that the call to Christian leadership is first of all a call to God. Before you are called to a position, be it small group leader, pastor, to be a missionary, a children's ministry worker, or a worship leader – before you are called to a leadership position, you are first of all called into a relationship with the living God.

SLIDE – Exodus 3:1-2

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.

There is often a time lag between the time we say no to the world and the time God opens up a door of fruitful ministry for us. For Moses it was 40 years that he spent on the far side of the desert. For Jesus it was the time that he had a sense of call at age 12 to his release into ministry, which was nearly 20 years. For the apostle Paul, he spent years in the Arabian desert. Often, utterly uninitiated by us, God initiates an encounter with himself. He says, “OK, the time of waiting is up. You’ve been on the backburner simmering for long enough. It is time to move you up to the front burner. It is time to get you off the bench and into the game.”

Here is Moses doing what he did every day for years, looking for grazing land for his sheep. And God decides that the training time in the desert is now over. God says, “now is the time.” And we struggle with that. Why today and not yesterday or the thousand other days before that? Only God knows. How come healing today or tomorrow, but not the previous hundred times we’ve prayed? Only God knows how long he wants us to spend in the desert. Why did dad, mom, husband, wife, friend, or child accept Christ today and not the countless other opportunities they had? Only God knows.

But I’ve seen this principle so many times in my own life and in the lives of others. God chooses the moment for intervention. And he simply doesn’t measure time the way we do. He’s never a moment too slow and he’s never a moment too late.

It is important to note that Moses was not seeking this experience. The call into leadership is not something everyone seeks. Its okay if you don’t seek it, 1 Tim. 3 says. But God initiates the call. He starts pressing in on your life. He communicates to you that it is time to get into the game. I’ve put enough into you. It’s time to swim out into the deep. I love God’s sudden initiation.

There is a woman in our church who has been a leader here for many years. Quite a number of you know her, especially if you’ve been involved in children’s ministry. Her name is Candy Johnson. She said that I could share a story of God’s sudden break through with her because she had a burning bush experience.

About 25 years ago surgeons came out of a hospital room to inform her that her husband, Mickey, had at most 2-3 weeks to live. Essentially, he would die from

starvation. Several months before Mickey was diagnosed with cancer and had undergone intense treatments of chemotherapy and radiation. The treatments, which were meant to cure him, had become the source of his problem. The radiation, which was really a form of malpractice in his case, had so severely burned his digestive tract that he was no longer able to eat.

Mickey wasted down to 80 pounds and the doctors tried one last time to surgically correct the problem. But they were unsuccessful. According to them there was only one thing left to do, to keep Mickey as comfortable as possible until he died.

During Mickey's long illness, God had done a miraculous work in Candy's heart. She said, "Gradually, I moved from an attitude of trying to control God to letting God control me. When I was given the sad news that Mickey was going to die, my attitude was, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' [That's directly from the book of Job.]

Candy writes, "I went home that day accepting God's will and tried to prepare for my beloved husband's death. The next morning during my quiet time with the Lord, I read all the passages I could find about heaven. As I read, the reality of heaven seemed to fill the room. As heaven came close, my heart was equally filled with joy. Soon Mickey was going to see Jesus face to face. My joy spilled over into me praising God for his goodness."

"While all of this was going on, a voice suddenly cut across my thoughts and spoke to me. It was as clear as any voice I had ever heard. God was speaking and he precisely said, 'Mickey is going to live.'"

Candy said, "I immediately answered him with, 'I know he's going to live forever with you in heaven, Lord.'"

Quickly God answered back with, "No. Mickey is going to live in his own body on this earth, in this life."

There was no mistake. God was referring to his current life here on earth. That afternoon when I went to visit Mickey in the hospital, I told him about the awesome, yet humanly impossible words God had spoken. We were encouraged, and yet for Mickey to live a miracle would have to occur. Was God going to send an angel to touch Mickey's body? Or maybe some pastor would come over to pray for him and he would be healed.

Candy writes, "Our miracle came within the next few days. We weren't expecting it, but it was from God. It was a new medical procedure called Total Parental Nutrition. One could actually be fed intravenously and live a near normal life. It was still in the experimental stages, but Mickey was a prime candidate to give it a try.

He was flown by air ambulance to UCLA Hospital in LA County. Upon arrival, they immediately began him on TPN and new life began to flow back into his body. I'll

never forget Mickey's first night home from the hospital. We were talking of God's mercy and the added time on earth that God had miraculously given him. We both agreed that we would be more blessed if we could have 3-4, maybe 5 more years together. Mickey lived 15 more years before God took him home.

Candy had a clear word from God. In Moses' case the intervention was by way of a burning bush.

Moses was no longer the esteemed son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was just a common desert bush. And if he ever was going to have any impact in this world, if he ever was going to be a leader that made a difference, it was not going to be by way of his natural endowment, his great education, or his privileged background. It was going to be because of the fire of God's presence.

The same thing, friends, is true of us. You know, when it gets down to it, we are all just common desert bushes. No matter how great your or my education was, no matter how much privilege you were raised in, or the degree that you may have next to your name, or the size of your home, or the kind of car you drive. Are you aware that the only thing that will ever work in your life, at least in terms of Christian leadership, is if God's presence sets you on fire?

Do you pray before you go to important meetings, "Lord, give me your presence. Put your fire on me." Do you know from the depths of your soul the truth of John 15:5 that we studied several months ago? Jesus says:

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I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.

And apart from intimacy with God, apart from welcoming the Holy Spirit to fill us and guide us and empower us to love beyond our natural capacities, to forgive beyond our natural capacities, to encourage people beyond our natural capacities, to heal beyond our natural capacities, to bear witness beyond our natural capacities, to do what we can't do on our own. Apart from the fire of the Holy Spirit, we are simply common desert bushes. Pray for God's fire to come into your life. Fire in the Bible is a symbol of God's presence, in particular, his holiness and his separateness.

See, the call to Christian leadership is first of all a call to God. Moses hears the call, Exodus 3:5-6

SLIDE

Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing in 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.

Leadership does not begin with a call to leadership. It begins with a call to God, an encounter with God, a deep meeting with God, a discovery of God. I am very suspicious of church's that promote people into leadership that do not show a depth of experience with God. You know, and I say this with affection, but you know that in some churches, so long as you are willing and you are a warm body, you are immediately put into a position of church leadership.

Here's the material, you can teach the adult Sunday School class.
You can be a teen leader; you are young and have plenty of energy.
You seem bright, why don't you take over this small group?
You seem musical, why don't you lead worship?

The most basic question a potential Christian leader must answer is what do you really know in your own experience of God? Have you met with God? Have you had an encounter with God? Christian leadership is all about pointing people to God. You can't give away what you don't have. Christian leadership is all about developing habits of turning to God first when you are anxious, not last. A Christian leader is a person who doesn't regularly medicate away their feelings of boredom, or medicate away their feelings of anger, or lust, or pain, weakness, or depression with TV, pornography, or some activity, or work, or shopping, or another unhealthy relationship, or more and more ministry. A Christian leader is someone who has formed a habit of turning to God in need.

And you and I have a choice – all the time. We can use our coping mechanisms, whatever your particular coping mechanism is when you are depressed or bored, or you feel lust or anxious or angry. You can use your particular coping mechanism, or you and I can develop the character and habit of turning to God. The call to Christian leadership starts with the call to God. A call to get deeply rooted in God.

Who is God? God is holy. Exodus 3:5,

SLIDE

Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground.

There is a holy fear of God that any prospective Christian leader must discover. And this holy fear of God becomes the foundation of your relationship with God. By fear of God, I am not thinking of a fear of going into God's presence. Hebrews 4:16 tells us:

SLIDE

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Going to a throne of grace, we can approach God with confidence. But by a holy fear of God, I'm thinking of a fear of being separated from God, a fear of going our own way, a fear of wasting our lives in the shallow end of the kiddie pool, rather than

swimming out into the deep. By a holy fear of God I mean a fear of God letting you have your own way. You know, God's worst discipline is often not found in preventing you or me from getting what we're running after. God's worst discipline is in letting us get what we're after and losing his presence. It is good for you to fear missing God's highest and best for your life. It is good to fear wasting your life and spending your old age with tons of regrets. It is good to fear displeasing God, or bringing sorrow to others. It is good for you and me to fear, most of all, living without a sense of God's favor or without a relationship with him. It is good to fear getting a million things in life and missing God.

The fear of God, Proverbs tells us, is the beginning of wisdom.

God is holy and God is separate, so Moses is called to separate himself from the world, from the dirt and stain, and come into God's presence. In many Eastern cultures to this day in Muslim mosques and Buddhist Temples, people remove their sandals before entering as a sign of reverence to God. And we Christians today separate ourselves from the world by turning from our sins. We come into the world clean and acceptable through our trust in the sacrificial blood of Christ for our sins.

We start with a foundation of the holy fear of God and we discover in our meeting with God that God is tender and empathetic. We read in Exodus 3:7:

SLIDE

And 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, I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to 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. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

The words here are striking. God is so tender and empathetic. He sees the misery of his people. He hears their cries. He is concerned. He comes down. He sees oppression. Our cries reach him. What God says to Moses about seeing his people 3500 years ago, he says to all of his people today.

If you are miserable, I see it.

If you are suffering injustice, I am aware of it.

If you are regularly in tears about a rebellious child, or about a sick relative, I understand. I know.

A call to Christian leadership is first of all a call to know God as holy and separate, as tender and empathetic to you, and to those you are going to be ministering to. As we minister, Christian leaders are aware that God is for people. He is not against them. He always wills good for his people. He wants to embrace people. He wants to bring

comfort. He wants to encourage. He wants to draw the hurting to himself, not drive them away. He seeks and saves the lost.

And God is present and active. Moses expresses his reluctance to lead as he looks at himself. V.11:

SLIDE

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

A sense of personal inadequacy is part and parcel of so many reluctant leaders calling. In fact, for many of you who are truly called to be Christian leaders, and you begin to get a glimpse of the size of the task that God is calling you to, and the scope of the opposition, and the weak condition of God’s people, when you look at your own capacity, you would say the same thing to Moses, “Who am I that I would do this? I am inadequate. I can’t do it. I can’t. I, being what I am, couldn’t possibly lead a group of women. I being what I am, couldn’t possibly lead a group of men, or a small group, or be a children’s ministry leader, or lead out in politics.”

Gideon, when he was called, said, “But I come from the feeblest of families. My family background will never allow me to be a leader.”

Jeremiah said, “I’m too young.”

Peter said, “I’m too sinful.”

It is good for you to feel inadequate. Paul cried out, “Who is equal to the task of ministry? Who could possibly serve as a Christian leader?” (2 Cor. 2:15).

What is the answer to your deepest sense of inadequacy and my deep sense of inadequacy? V. 12:

SLIDE

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.”

I want you to underline that phrase in your Bible: “I will be with you.” Clearly, God says, it is not who you are. What matters in my calling is who I am. “I will be with you.” This is God’s answer for every task he calls you to. “I will be with you.” This is God’s answer to your reluctance, “I will be with you.” This is God’s answer to the hesitating leader. “I will be with you.” This is God’s word for the Jews in Haggai’s day, who didn’t feel they could ever rebuild the destroyed Temple. God sent the prophet Haggai with one simple message: “I am with you,” declares the Lord.

After Jesus announces to us his Great Commission, he’s going to send each of us out throughout the world making disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of

the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded us, our natural reaction is, “how?” How in the world could missions happen? How could we possibly bring the Muslim world into followership to Jesus Christ? How can my Muslim neighbor, or my Jewish neighbor, or my gay colleague who has had such a horrible experience of church, how could people around me who don’t know God ever come to embrace Jesus as their Lord? When Jesus presents to us this monumental task of bringing the world into submission to him, of course we immediately confront our own inadequacies. How? With me being what I am, Lord, and with the world being what it is, and with Satan being what he is, how can we spread your kingdom?

And Jesus says, “Here is my answer. Matthew 28:20:”

SLIDE

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

Christian leadership is not a matter of who you are. It is a matter of growing in your faith regarding who God is. Is he calling you to move out from the shallow end of the pool and push out into the deep?

God is not only holy and separate. He’s not only empathetic and tender. But he’s also present and active. Indeed, the very name of God suggests God’s active presence with us. V. 13:

SLIDE

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?”

V. 14:

SLIDE

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.’”

There are literally hundreds of scholarly articles written on the meaning of this phrase from Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am.” What does God mean when he calls himself “I am?”

The most natural explanation is one that is readily seen in the original Hebrew. God’s name is related to the Hebrew verb which means, “to be.” In fact, God’s name is the first person play on words of the Hebrew word “hayah.” The Hebrew pronunciation of God’s name is probably “Yahweh.” God says, in essence, “I am being that I am being.” Or “I am the Is-ing One.”

In other words, I am not just some philosophical principle. The Lord says I am not some abstract force. I am not merely someone who existed in the past and did great

things 2000 years ago. I am not merely a doctrine in a theology book, or a scientific conclusion of a brilliant scientific argument. I am not just the one who got the world started and then stepped aside to let people take over.

And the Lord says, “I am not someone who will merely do something great in the future, when my Son returns to establish his kingdom. I am not static. I am active being. I am actively working in the present, right now at this moment. If you want to know who I am, I am the one who is always personally present with you. I am the one who is always personally active in your life. I am the one who is always personally involved.”

“In the hospital room, I am there. When you feel isolated as a Christian, separated from fellowship, I am there. In your family, I am present. In moving you to growth, I am active. I am at work in your life. I am on the move. I am drawing the lost. I am protecting the weak. I am constantly speaking. I am constantly loving. I am constantly empathizing. I am constantly healing, rescuing, and redeeming.”

His beingness, his AM-ness means his present activity. God is sovereign and powerful. See, the call to Christian leadership is a call first to God, not to worship, but to God. We read in v. 21-22: God can make even those who are hostile to us favorably disposed to us.

SLIDE

And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed. Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians.

I felt that this week at the Law School. That God made people who would normally be hostile, favorably disposed to a Christian perspective. Have you ever felt that? God intervening on your behalf to turn someone's heart toward you instead of away from you?

Christian leaders know that experience. They trust that God is sovereign and powerful, even over the hearts of women and men. If God wants something done through you, he can give you favor from the most unlikely people. I've heard people say, “I can't believe it. My husband has agreed to open up our home to a Bible study. He's always been resistant to having people in. But he agreed and seems excited about it.”

I've heard people say, “I can't believe it. I've actually been invited into the mayor's office to give a Christian presentation.”

“I can't believe I got the boss' approval for my proposal.”

“I can't believe it. My professor actually supported my views.”

One of my favorite verses from the book of Proverbs is Proverbs 16:7:

SLIDE

When a man's [and I would add woman's] ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.

What a promise. If you are in God's will, if you are doing what he's called you to do, don't ever say, "There is no way for this call to be fulfilled." If God wants it done, he can get it done. Pray for favor from the powerful. Pray for alliances to rise up from unlikely places. Pray for God, who is sovereign and powerful, to work at the depths of people's hearts, to move their hearts toward the support of God's Kingdom.

I'm going to skip a point. And then we see that the ultimate issue for Moses is his will. Moses had a dozen excuses for why he couldn't go before Pharaoh. Why he couldn't lead. Why he wasn't the right person. Why this wasn't the right time. He didn't have the authority. Who am I? He didn't know the message. I don't know you well enough God. What shall I say?

In Exodus 4:10,

SLIDE

Moses said to the Lord, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."

I'm not gifted. I'm not a great speaker. I can't do this.

V. 11:

SLIDE

The Lord said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who give him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

Again, it is not about you, it's about me. It's about my call.

And we finally get down to the ultimate issue. Moses simply doesn't want to do it. And that is the ultimate issue with the reluctant leader. It is a matter of our will, our choice. When God speaks and says, "Move out," will we do it?

Moses in verse 14 said:

SLIDE

"O Lord, please send someone else to do it." And the Lord's anger burned against Moses.

Enough. Do not debate. Enough. We've talked enough.

Let me ask you a few questions in closing. Is the Holy Spirit saying to some of you today, "It is time for you to get off the bench and into the game."? Maybe you are a former leader here at Vineyard Columbus, but you've been sidelined for some reason. Your group didn't fire out the way you hoped it would and so you are no longer leading a group. Maybe you have experienced family pressures, or the birth of a

child, job pressures, or aging parents. But is the Holy Spirit saying to any of you, “You need to choose to get back in the game and be a Christian leader here.”

Maybe you were significantly used by God in another church, but since you’ve been here, you’ve just (and I say this with all affection), you’ve pretty much been occupying space, but you haven’t been leading anyone into discipleship. You haven’t let yourself at Vineyard Columbus be useful to the Master. All of your leadership is sometime in the past, for some of you in the distant past. You haven’t recently disciplined a younger Christian brother. You haven’t recently led in children’s ministry. You haven’t recently led a Bible study or small group. Is the Holy Spirit saying to you, “No more excuses? I know about your hurt from that former church. I know about your schedule. I know about your kids’ activities.”

But is the Lord saying to some of you that it is time to stop sitting on the back burner and start participating in a strong way again in the spread of his kingdom?

Maybe you have been in this church for a while. God has been good to you. You have grown spiritually and are learning. You are being stretched and challenged. Is the Holy Spirit saying to you today, “It’s time to give away what you’ve been given? No more excuses.”

Let me shoot straight with you. Over the last several months I’ve been talking about community, building community here in this church. We’re so isolated. People will never grow on their own. We need to be connected to one another. But community is never going to happen without leaders. We have about 6000 people here each weekend. Some of them are brand new Christians. Some of them are seekers. A thousand plus are children. Many of them are women. Many are singles. Thousands are married. The 6000+ people in our church need people who will respond to God’s call to lead.

Here is what I would like to ask you to do. Regarding some practical steps to answer God’s call, why don’t all of you who have an interest in leading a small group here at Vineyard, fill out this insert in the bulletin. Tear off the top portion and keep it. Then place the bottom half in one of the plastic boxes or drop it off at the information counter in the lobby.

Also, small group leaders, I’m going to ask you to encourage those you believe God has equipped for leadership to get off the bench, to get involved. Leaders, if you know of someone who God has his hand on, give Bill Christensen a call and recommend those people.

Finally, if you are sensing God’s call to lead here at Vineyard Columbus, and are wrestling with being a reluctant leader, why don’t you come forward and let someone pray for you?

Conclusion.

The Reluctant Leader

Rich Nathan

November 22-23, 2003

John: Building Hope in a World of Despair

Exodus 3:1-4:17

- I. The Call To Christian Leadership Often Begins With Saying No To The World
 - A. God Uses Our Educations (Acts 7:22; Dan. 1:3-4; Acts 22:3)
 - B. God Uses Our No's (Heb. 11:24-26)
- II. The Call To Christian Leadership Is First Of All A Call To God
 - A. God Takes The Initiative (Ex. 3:1-4)
 - B. God Makes The Difference (Ex. 3:3, 4)
 - C. God Must Be Known
 - 1. God Is Holy And Separate (Ex. 3:5, 6)
 - 2. God Is Tender And Empathetic (Ex. 3:7-10)
 - 3. God Is Present And Active (Ex. 3:11-15)
 - a. God Promises To Be With Us (Ex. 3:11, 12; Mt. 28:20)
 - b. God Promises To Be Active (Ex. 3:13-15)
 - 4. God Is Sovereign And Powerful
 - a. Extraordinary Favor From Unlikely People (Ex. 3:21, 22)
 - b. Extraordinary Success From Ordinary Sacrifices (Ex. 4:1-9)
- III. The Call To Christian Leadership Demands A Response (Ex. 4:10-17)