

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: Open to the Impossible
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Exodus 3:1-12; Matthew 10:1-4

I felt like a fraud. It was the first official day of classes at seminary, and I felt like a fraud. To understand this, you need a bit of background. A little over a month after our wedding, Cindy and I loaded all our worldly possessions into an unairconditioned U-Haul truck and drove from Houston to Richmond, VA. I then spent the next six weeks in “Greek School” learning enough Greek so that I could read the Bible in its original language. With Cindy’s help I managed to pass. At that point I was officially a student. The first day of classes I gathered with the other first year students and we took the obligatory class photo and then went to meet

Dr. John Leith, perhaps one of the world’s greatest Reformed theologians. He leveled his gaze over us and then said the following, “Most of you should not be here. If you can’t explain soteriology, ecclesiology, and Christology and if you are not familiar with Biblical interpretation, then you have no business being here. You need to pack up all your things, go back to college and get a degree in Bible or theology. Then you can come back and see us.” As I looked around the room, it seemed as if everyone else was checking off their list of yes, I know those things, while I was just trying to figure out what those words meant. What you need to know is that prior to entering seminary my entire religious background was two Old Testament college courses and reading the New Testament once. I felt like an imposter and figured that soon they would discover my lack of knowledge and ask me to leave.

Feeling like an imposter actually has a name, which is Imposter Syndrome, or imposterism. Imposter Syndrome happens when we believe that we have been asked to, or promoted to do, or hired to do something that is over our heads and that we are not competent to do. Wikipedia puts it this way, “Imposter syndrome is a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud. Despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing this phenomenon are convinced that they are frauds and do not deserve all that they have achieved.” It takes the old saying “Fake it till you make it” and turns it into “You have made it, but you are only faking it.” While this syndrome was originally studied in high achieving women, later studies showed that it can affect all persons, regardless of their educational or achievement status. I bring this syndrome to our attention this morning because I have often wondered if it was at the heart of Moses’ conversation with God at the burning bush.

To understand this, we need to return to Moses’ story. Moses was a Hebrew child raised in the Egyptian palace. Though his princess mother called him son, it would be obvious to all that he was not her son. He was ethnically different. I imagine as he grew older and realized that he was Hebrew and not Egyptian, he would have felt like a fraud; like he didn’t fit in; that one day someone would say, “You are not one of us. You are a Hebrew. You need to be a slave again.” This must have been Imposter Syndrome on steroids. Then, after he fled the palace because he killed an Egyptian, he ended up as a shepherd. Now, while shepherding may seem like a noble profession to us, after all it was the shepherds who came to see Jesus, the Egyptians saw it as a disgusting, demeaning, and unclean job. Shepherds were the outcasts, the lowest of the low. So, when God, speaking to Moses out of the burning bush, says, “Hey, Moses I need to you to go free my people,” Moses must have been thinking to himself, “If I did that I would be even more of a fraud. They would ask me what I did for a living, and when I said shepherd, they would know that I could never be a liberator of people. I would just be a disgusting outcast and nothing more.” Again, Imposter Syndrome at work which ought to make us wonder why the disciples didn’t feel the same way.

I have often thought it odd that the disciples did not seem to suffer from the same syndrome as Moses. I say this because the disciples were not qualified at all to do what Jesus asked them to do, to cast out unclean spirits and to cure people of diseases. These twelve men were fisherfolk, carpenters, tax collectors, hot-heads, and all-around malcontents. Some may have had some formal education but none of them had been to miracle worker school. They had not been to the first century equivalent of Hogwarts where they got their wands and learned the magic spells that could drive out demons and heal diseases. Yet, evidently, as soon as Jesus commissioned and authorized them, they went out and began trying out their healing chops. Now, even though they were not completely successful in their efforts, it did not stop them from trying. Rather than explaining to Jesus that they were not qualified because of imposter syndrome, they went to work and changed lives. The question is, what was the difference? What was the difference between Moses and the disciples? Then answer I believe is that the disciples were open to the impossible.

I want to be clear at this point what I mean by being open to the impossible. I will begin by talking about what I don't mean. I don't mean the kind of late-night infomercials for Peter Popov's miracle spring water that can free you from debt by causing checks for thousands of dollars to miraculously appear in your mailbox. I don't mean Rev. Ike's prayer cloths that when applied would heal you from any and all diseases. And I certainly don't mean Bennie Hinn's famous miracle crusades where he would "cure" people by breathing the Holy Spirit on them. What I mean instead is being open to the possibility that God can be at work in us, using God's power and our abilities to accomplish more than we thought we could ever accomplish. It means being open to being used by God to accomplish the impossible. I realize that being open to the impossible, that God might be able to do amazing things through us, is something most of us find difficult to believe. In some ways it is like people claiming that they can't draw, or they can't sing because somewhere, sometime, someone has told them that they cannot do those things, and so they quit trying. And if they do try, then they have imposter syndrome, believing that someone will see right through them. In the same way, many of us have convinced ourselves that God can't really do anything through us because we don't have the real gifts to serve God. We become in some ways a Moses and not a disciple. If that is the case, I want to introduce you to Howard.

Howard was an elder at a small inner-loop church in San Antonio, TX. As the neighborhood in which the church resided became more Hispanic and poorer, the church members decided they needed to serve those around them. They opened a food pantry and offered money to assist with rent and utilities. But Howard believed that God was calling them to do more...and this was exciting for Howard because he was a man who was always open to the impossible. One day Howard told the Session that he believed that God was calling their church to build a multi-story low-income housing project. Most of the members believed his quest was a fool's errand...that it was impossible. To even consider such an endeavor was absurd. Howard, however refused to give up on the impossible. And so, as Howard put it, with God's guidance he met the right people, connected with the right resources, and ultimately convinced the congregation to be open to the impossible. The end result was Westminster Square, a 107-unit affordable housing complex open to low-income seniors. This year, after fifty years of operations, the complex was sold to a national Presbyterian Housing Corporation. The sale netted the board over six million dollars, all of which will be used to fund mission and ministry in inner city San Antonio. And all it took was one man and ultimately one congregation, who were open to the impossible, along with God's silent partnership, to change the lives of hundreds of seniors in need.

This is what can happen when we are open to the impossible, when we are open to using our gifts in partnership with God's power. The impossible does not need to be a 107-unit apartment building. It can be teaching Sunday school, being a Covenant partner, praying at a meeting or Bible study, or any of hundreds of other things. My challenge for all of us this morning then is this, to ask ourselves, "How am I being open to the impossible? To being open to God doing something amazing through me?"