

“RISE UP, SHEPHERD, AND FOLLOW”

Luke 2:8-15 ¹

My friend Steve Hadden is fond of pointing out that the world is forever asking “What do you do?” but that this is the wrong question. The right question is “What are you doing with your life?” Most of us can’t answer that question. We don’t really know what we’re doing with our lives.²

Stephen Covey once interviewed a Type-A fellow who lamented, “My life is hectic! I’m running all day long—meetings, phone calls, paperwork, appointments. . . . My output is tremendous; I’m getting a lot done. But I get this feeling inside sometimes, ‘*So what? What are you doing that really counts?*’ And I have to admit that I don’t know.”³

“What are you doing that Really Counts?” is our question for this morning. And our African-American Spiritual for this week is “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.”

I don’t think any of us are shepherds in the sense meant by the song, nor are we likely to be, so I want to focus on the four words, **“Rise up . . . and Follow.”** And I want to think with you about two shepherds, one traditional, and one, not so much.

When he awoke on that particular morning, our first shepherd could not have anticipated the drastic turn that his life was about to take. He probably had risen with the sun, rinsed his face with water from his flask, and set off with his sheep for the day’s foraging. Later in the day, he turned aside to investigate a bush that was on fire, and yet it did not burn up. In the arid desert, the dry wood should have been rapidly consumed like a three-week-old Christmas tree—two or three minutes at best—but this bush just kept burning.

Suddenly a Voice began calling his name: **“Moses! Moses!”** “*Here I am,*” he replied, realizing with rather a shock that the Voice seemed to be coming from the bush!

“Don’t come any closer,” the Voice said. **“Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”**

Our shepherd covered his face, because he was afraid to look at God—or whatever this was. Moses had heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but those guys lived a long time ago. As far as he knew, nobody had heard from this God in nearly 500 years. “Lucky me,” he thought ruefully.

“I have come to rescue my people,” the Voice continued. **“I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”**

Moses sat down on a rock. Sure, he’d grown up as the Prince of Egypt, but that was forty years ago. Things were different now.

“Who am I to do such a thing?” he said. “I’m a nobody. Just look at me here, in the middle of the desert, alone with a bunch of sheep! If you want me to do something, how about something I can do? I like being a shepherd. I like the silence of the wilderness. I enjoy keeping my own company. You’ve got the wrong guy to talk to Pharaoh. They’ll laugh me right out of the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 9, 2020.

² Stephen L. Hadden, “A Vocation Clarification Seminar for College Students at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky” (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 12.

³ Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 17.

palace . . . or worse, they'll kill me. I've got a bad record in Egypt, remember? They may still have my picture up in the post office."

"I WILL BE WITH YOU," the Voice said. Moses didn't know then that his knowledge of the desert was precisely the point. He had no idea that he was about to lead his people *through that very same desert* . . . for another 40 years.

"Now look," Moses said. "Suppose I do go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What God are you talking about? What is his name?' Then what am I going to say? It's been a pretty long time since we've heard from you, you know."

"I need no name to distinguish me from other gods. I am the ONE God, the ONLY God. I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

"That's not a very clear answer," Moses said. "I don't think it will work. They won't believe me."

Now the Voice told Moses to throw down his shepherd's staff. When it hit the ground, it turned into a large snake. Then, when Moses grabbed it by the tail, it became a staff again.

"Put your hand inside your robe," the Voice said, and when Moses did, his hand came out horribly diseased. **"Do it again,"** said the Voice, and now Moses' hand came out well and whole.

"Okay, that's pretty impressive," Moses said. "But I need to tell you that I'm not a good speaker. I never have been, and I'm not now, even after you've spoken to me. I'm clumsy with words. The sheep and I get along okay, but with people I get all tongue-tied. Why do you think I'm out here by myself?"

"WHO MAKES MOUTHS, for heaven's sake! Don't you think I know what you can and can't do?! I will help you! Now GO!"

"Nope. Send somebody else." Moses had run out of excuses. Now he simply refused to go.

"Look," God said, **"I knew you would do this. But I've already taken care of it. Your older brother, Aaron, is a good speaker, and he is also better at obeying than you are. Aaron is already on the way to meet you here. I'm going to reveal my messages to you, and Aaron will deliver them. Now GET GOING!"** And Moses went.

This famous encounter—truly a "Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow" kind of moment—reminds me of some other familiar encounters:

- *The LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).*
- The very next day after Rebekah first met Abraham's servant who had come from hundreds of miles away, her family called her and asked, *"Will you go with this man?"* And she responded, *"I will go" (Genesis 24:58).*
- After Isaiah's overwhelming vision of God in the Temple, God asked, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* And Isaiah answered, *"Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8).*
- ¹⁸ *As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were*

fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20).

- When Paul encountered the radiant glory of the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus, he asked, “*Who are you, Lord?*” And the answer came, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do*” (Acts 9:5-6).

Now while you and I may not receive such commissions as these, there’s no guarantee that we won’t, either. And so long as we insist on staying close to home and on being home for supper, we’ll not have many adventures. Let me tell you about the call of another kind of shepherd

On December 1, 1955—my fifth birthday—a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to get up to give her seat on the bus to a white person. Five days later, thousands of Montgomery’s black citizens gathered at the Holt Street Baptist Church for the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and they elected the young pastor of Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr., to be their president.

The Association was planning to organize a boycott of the Montgomery bus system, and Pastor King was unsure about this idea. He was concerned that such a boycott might be unethical because if it shut down Montgomery buses, it would deprive other riders of a service that they depended on, and deprive bus drivers of the way that they made a living. He was also concerned that a boycott might be unChristian because it was a response to an injury by inflicting an injury. It was revenge.

King had to work through these worries about the movement before he could lead it. He later wrote, “I came to see that what we were really doing was withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system, rather than merely withdrawing our support from the bus company. The bus company, being an external expression of the system, would naturally suffer, but the basic aim was to refuse to cooperate with evil.”

On this momentous occasion, Dr. King had just twenty minutes to gather his thoughts before one of the most crucial speeches of his life. He worried, “How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds? What could I say to keep them courageous and prepared for positive action and yet devoid of hate and resentment?⁴ Here’s part of what he decided to say:

“We are here this evening for serious business. We are here in a general sense because first and foremost, we are American citizens and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning. We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.”⁵

“Just the other day, just last Thursday to be exact, one of the finest citizens in Montgomery – not one of the finest Negro citizens, one of the finest *citizens* in Montgomery – was taken from a bus and carried to jail and arrested because she refused to get up to give her seat to a white person. . . . And I’m happy that since it had to happen, it happened to a person that nobody can call a disturbing factor in the community. . . .

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 59-60.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. Address to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955; from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project.

“You know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amid the dull piercing chill of an Alpine November. There comes a time.

“We’re here this evening because we’re tired now. And I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people. . . . We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. That’s all. . . .

“There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery. There will be no white persons pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and lynched for not cooperating. There will be nobody among us who will stand up and defy the Constitution of this nation. We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist. My friends, I want it to be known that we are going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city.

“And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we’re doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. Love has no meaning. We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. . . .

“We will not be content until oppression is wiped out of Montgomery, and really out of America. We won’t be content until that is done. We are merely insisting on the dignity and worth of every human personality. . . . I can hear a voice saying, *‘If you do it unto the least of these, my brothers, you do it unto me.’*”

“And I won’t rest, I will face intimidation, and everything else, along with these other stalwart fighters for democracy and for citizenship. We don’t mind it, so long as justice comes out of it. And I’ve come to see now that as we struggle for our rights, maybe some of [us] will have to die. But somebody said, ‘if a man doesn’t have something that he’ll die for, he isn’t fit to live.’

Dr. King did not merely inspire his listeners that day. He inspired himself. He must have realized, when he stepped down from the pulpit, that he had found his ultimate calling. And, for the remaining twelve years and four months of his life, he was faithful to that calling. Dr. King persisted in demonstrating for justice and equality until he met the fate that was in the cards, part of the deal, from the moment that he rose to speak from the pulpit of the Holt Street Church.⁶

Rise up . . . and Follow. So what is there today, my friend, that needs your support and involvement? What Great Cause, what Great Call, has your name on it today?

God’s call came to shepherds outside of Bethlehem. God’s call came to Moses in the wilderness. God’s call came to Simon and Andrew beside the Sea of Galilee. God’s call came to Martin King in Montgomery, Alabama. **What is God calling YOU to be and to do?**

Our initial call from God is the call to be *born again* (John 3:3)—to acknowledge our sinfulness and to accept God’s offer of forgiveness and new life, purchased on Calvary’s Cross.

⁶ www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/when-martin-luther-king-jr-became-a-leader

But to stop there is like never growing beyond the state of being newborn. God intends for us to grow spiritually *throughout our lives*, and **as we grow, God summons us to offer what we now know of ourselves to what we now know of God; and new levels of obedience bring new levels of growth.**

My friends, *God will accomplish His purposes in the world with us or without us.* But God invites us to be a part of the action and to enjoy the benefits and the adventure of that participation. Moses did everything he could think of to avoid being obedient to God's purposes; but once he started out, he never looked back. And as Moses grew in his obedience, the Bible tells us that God talked with Moses "face to face" as a person speaks with a best friend (Exodus 33:11).

The call of Moses reminds us that God works through ordinary folks to accomplish the Divine Purpose in the world. Moses' call reminds us that things we view as insignificant resources, things like an ordinary stick and an ordinary bush, are major assets if they're available to God. God told Moses, "**I don't need a pretty bush or an educated bush or an eloquent bush. Any old bush will do as long as I'm in the bush.**"⁷

My friend, God has a purpose for your life. God has a purpose *for the next chapter* of your life—and that chapter just might begin today. Don't fret about what you don't understand. Be obedient to the Light you already have, and you'll get more light when it is needed.

The great early American preacher, Jonathan Edwards, lived by a maxim that is worthy of each of our lives:

Resolved: that all persons should live for the glory of God.

Resolved second: That whether others do or not, I will.⁸

So what are you doing with your life?

Choose Adventure.

Rise up . . . and Follow God's call!

⁷ Major Ian Thomas, cited by Luis Palau in *Men of Integrity*, May/June 2002.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Leadership*, vol. 6, no. 1.