

MATT MIOFSKY

LET



GO

LEANING INTO THE FUTURE
WITHOUT FEAR

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ABINGDON PRESS
NASHVILLE

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To my wife, Jessica. We have changed a lot over
twenty years of marriage and managed it well.
Here is to keeping it up for all the change God
has in store for us.*

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INTRODUCTION



You don't have to do it alone. That is the first thing that I want you to hear. And before I even explain what "it" is, know this: you aren't alone in what you might be going through right now, and you don't have to navigate the uncertainty of your life all by yourself. Maybe right now you are in the midst of major change, and you are scared about what it will bring. Maybe you are contemplating a change and aren't sure how to weigh the risk involved. Maybe you are on the other side of change and now are secretly scared of doing anything to screw up what feels like a stable life. But here is the thing: we cannot always control change. It happens. There is no avoiding it. Just when you think things in your life are stable, and you are trying like hell to keep it that way, the rug can be pulled out from under you. Whatever you are facing right now, whatever changes are happening in your life, or whatever fears you secretly harbor, you are not alone.

This book is a guide to managing the transitions in your life using faith as your compass.

It is often said that change is part of life, and it's true. But there is a difference between change and transition. While change may be a given, transition is not. William Bridges made this observation in a book entitled *Managing Transitions*, written for corporations and organizations that undergo major change. That book contributed to a

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burgeoning field within business called change management. The essence of the insight was simple. Change, on the one hand, is an external and physical evolution, manipulation, or development that happens within an organization. Some changes are intentional and controlled by the leaders of the organization. Other changes cannot be controlled. Either way, change is always happening all around us, on a personal, organizational, civic, political, or global level. Things are changing. Always.

Change management is the art of ushering in intentional change (or dealing with unintentional change) by tending to the transitions that must happen in and with the very people who are experiencing those changes.

Transition, on the other hand, is an internal, psychological process that happens on the personal level. Transition is about what is happening to people, in people, and with people as they *experience* change. Unlike the change itself, transition is not a given. By definition, transition means moving from one place or situation to another. But not everyone makes it successfully to that other place. Successful transition requires effort, care, and intentionality. People can learn

to internalize and transition along with the changes that happen around them. They can also choose *not* to, which usually results in getting stuck. I suspect all of us can call to mind people in our company, organization, or church who simply refuse to accept, process, or adapt to changes that are happening all around them. Circumstances, processes, or realities may change, but they don't (and often won't!). They refuse to move forward, and very often they get left behind or become an impediment to the organization. Therefore, change management is the art of ushering in intentional change (or dealing with unintentional change) by tending to the transitions that must happen in and with the very people who are experiencing those changes. People who ignore the need for change management do so at their own peril.

So with this distinction in mind, let me say it again. Change is an unavoidable part of life, but transition is not. To take this a bit further, change is easy. Despite what everyone says, it is simple to change things. Transitions, however, are hard. Most of us find this out the hard way.

Take a church, for instance (I am a pastor, so you'll get a few church references along the way in this book). Suppose a new pastor begins working at a one-hundred-year-old church steeped in traditions and ways of doing things that people have gotten used to. Take something simple, like the time of the church's worship service. Imagine that for one hundred years, worship has started at 10:00 a.m. For the hour before worship, the church gathers for Sunday school (for you non-church people, these are small groups that pray and study the Bible. Think of it as a religious book group).

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For the thirty minutes after worship, church members usually gather for coffee, donuts, and gossip. Factor in travel time, and you have a group of people who have a very regular, two-and-a-half-hour routine every Sunday morning. And for some people, they have been doing this their entire life. So much so that it has become a rhythm, likely leading to other traditions. Maybe they go to lunch after worship. That will get them to the restaurant just before noon (in time to beat the other churches in the area). This is their life, and they rather like it that way. That is, after all, why they have done it for all these years.

Now suppose this new pastor comes in and within the first month realizes that the church really needs to have two worship services because younger generations aren't connecting with the traditional style of the 10:00 a.m. service. So she decides to begin a second service. To accommodate the new service, she changes the times, but only slightly. Now there will be an 8:30 a.m. service and a 10:30 a.m. service. That way, there is still time in between for Sunday school, and people can maintain the tradition of donuts and gossip after church. It will work great, and it isn't that big of a change. The longtime members will have to adjust by only thirty minutes. It seems simple and makes perfect sense to the pastor. So the next weekend she stands up in church and announces that, beginning in a month, worship times will change to accommodate a new worship. Boom! It took her less than a week to change something that had been in place for one hundred years. And it was easy! All she had to do was, well, change it. What is all the fuss about?

She gets her answer immediately after church is over. During the coffee hour, she is inundated with people who are confused, surprised, and upset by the change. They bring up all sorts of collateral changes and unintended consequences that the pastor didn't expect (after all, thirty minutes is a big deal when you are trying to beat the church across town to lunch). But more than all of that, there is all this *emotion* that the pastor wasn't prepared for. Even after explaining, showing the rationale, and making a very reasonable and logical case for the changes, she finds that the people aren't budging. That is because the change may have happened, but the transition hasn't even begun. In order for the church to successfully manage a simple change, like the time of worship, there is going to need to be a long, intentional, and very careful process of managing transition for people. Just ask any pastor who has done this (or failed in the attempt). He or she will tell you that the change may be instant, but even a simple transition like this can take years.

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and transition in our personal lives
is critically important if we are to
become the people we were created
to be.*

So you get the difference. Change versus transition. We get change management on the organizational level, and

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there are plenty of resources, exercises, and books out there to teach leaders how to do this. But what does all that have to do with our personal lives? That is what I spent a lot of my ministry thinking about. What I have discovered is that this same dynamic between change and transition is true in our individual lives. And yet there are fewer resources exploring this on a personal level than there are for people in business. We assume that people will figure out how to change in their personal lives. If they want to lose weight, they can change their eating habits and exercise more. If you are unhappy in a relationship, change your partner or spouse. If you don't like what a particular habit is doing to you, change your behavior. If you don't like your job, change your job—or maybe even your career pathway. If you don't like where you live, change locations or cities. If your friends are boring and shallow, change your friendship circle. If you feel stuck and don't like the direction your life seems to be going, change directions. It seems pretty easy. If you want your life to look different, then change it.

And here's the thing. Change is actually pretty easy. We can find a new job. We can break up with our boyfriend or girlfriend. We can stop hanging out with certain people and start hanging out with others. We can wake up earlier, start working out, or decide to change careers. We can read a new book or take up a new hobby. We can change things in our life. Change is easy. But what many of us find is that the changes we try to make don't actually solve our underlying sense of dissatisfaction that led us to the change. We don't feel any different, we don't act particularly different, and all

too quickly we can return to what feels like the old normal, even though where we live, who we are with, and what we do for a living all have been changed. We can make changes to the circumstances of our life, but transitioning who we are, how we think, and what we are capable of is much harder work. We can change what we do, but the internal and deeply personal work of changing *who we are* is hard. Most of us don't know how to do it, and then we try to do it alone, without the wisdom and help of others or of the God who created us.

That is why I wrote this book. I believe that learning how to manage change and transition in our personal lives is critically important if we are to become the people we were created to be and to live the lives we were created to live. For that reason, managing change and transition in our lives is not only personal or psychological work but also spiritual work. If you are Jesus's follower, then change and transition are part of the package. I mean, Jesus was pretty explicit about his intentions. He doesn't want to tweak a few things in your life. Jesus wants to transform you. The Bible is crystal clear about what following Christ means: "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT).

We follow a God who wants to change our lives, who doesn't want us to be the same people tomorrow that we are today. That means that learning how to manage change and transition is critically important to a healthy faith. Some of you right now are facing major changes in your life, such

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as divorce, job loss, depression, parenting, aging, addiction, restlessness, graduation, retirement, failure, success, a new city, the loss of someone you love, starting a new business, or calling it quits on a failed attempt at something new. Changes are all around us. In the midst of them you may feel alone, but you are not. You don't have to manage change alone. We can do this together. More important, God is right alongside you preparing a future for you that you may not be able to feel or see right now.

So this book is about the changes life throws at us or that we choose for ourselves. It is a guide on how to manage those changes and transitions in a faithful and healthy way—not alone, but together with a God who is guiding us.

Anytime we talk about change, we have to confront the greatest obstacle to making this journey from here to there. The greatest obstacle is not time, money, the right job, or a lack of resources. It is not a lack of knowledge or experience. The greatest obstacle to navigating change in your life is fear.

I am writing this introduction during the week leading up to Christmas. If you read the Christmas story, there are no fewer than four references to fear. The first reaction people had to the good news that God wanted to change their lives, and the world, was fear! So when the angel showed up to Zechariah (John the Baptist's father), Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds in the fields, some of the first words they spoke were, "Do not be afraid." Fear, it seems, is the natural reaction even to good news and answered prayers. It is our default response to change. Even when we human beings are about to get what we want, we still can't help but be afraid!

And it doesn't stop there. Throughout his ministry Jesus continually had to address the fear that his disciples were constantly battling. When Jesus appeared to his followers after his resurrection, his first words to them were the same: "Don't be afraid."

The story of our life with God starts with God addressing our fears. Fear is the enemy that will keep you from becoming the person that God wants you to be and living the life that God wants you to live. And nothing brings out our fears more than change! So change and fear go hand in hand. In learning how to manage change and transition, a natural part of faith must include also confronting not just our individual fears but also the idea of fear itself.

But managing transition and overcoming fear in life do not happen in an instant. There are no magic bullets and no ways to skip over the hard stuff. This is a journey that each of us has to travel. Fortunately, we are not left to our own devices as we start this journey. The Bible doesn't just have stories and examples of what the journey looks like; it has a road map. Through the experiences of those who came before us, the Bible teaches us what managing change and facing fear looks like and how to do it alongside the God who will lead us.

There are a lot of stories we could focus on, but we are going to use one of the most significant stories in the Bible. It is *the* most significant story in the Old Testament: the exodus story. The exodus is a literal journey that the Israelites took from the land of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the "promised land." But the exodus story is much more than

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that. It is also a journey that the Israelites had to take from being the people they were to becoming the people God wanted them to be. It was a journey from slavery to freedom and a journey from forgotten people to chosen people. The exodus story is a journey of becoming someone new so that you can live in a new way and discover a new vision for life and purpose for existing. The exodus story is a holistic story of managing change and transition at every level—literal, geographical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. In this way the exodus story is more than a historical account of a certain group of people some 3,500 years ago. It is also an archetype of all of our stories. It is a roadmap for how change looks when you are following God's lead. It is the story from which all the other stories of the Bible build. Even Jesus himself saw his life and ministry as a fulfillment of this original story of transformation.

So whether you are reacting to a change you didn't choose, are contemplating a new reality for your life, or are in the midst of answering a God-inspired call to step away from where you are and toward something new, you are in the right place. Some of you are facing personal change and transition. Others of you may be leading in a church, company, or organization. Some of you are trying to navigate change with and for your family or a group of people you love. This book will give you plenty to think about, no matter at what level you find yourself managing change.

Wherever you are, just know that you aren't alone. We are going to do this together. And if you are scared, that

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is normal. It is more than that: it is good. It is a sign that you are doing something significant or following God in a truly courageous way. People have always been scared right before God does something new and incredible in their life. So take that fear as a good sign—even rejoice in it. But don't give in to it, and don't listen to it. Ultimately, your fear is the only thing standing in the way. It is the only obstacle between where you are and where God wants to lead you. It is the only real thing blocking you from transitioning from who you are to the person God wants you to be. So we will deal with fear, we will learn how to navigate through it, and ultimately, we will learn that, with God, fear doesn't have to win. We will conquer fear, and we will step out. We will navigate this change and transition, and we will be the better because we were willing to go for it. So as we set out on the journey, give yourself grace. Remember that it is a process. And, most important, know that you aren't alone. You have a God who is leading you every step of the way.

Chapter 1

GO FOR IT



You should go for it.

If there is something you have been thinking about trying, a risk you've been considering, a change that you want to make, or a new endeavor that you want to go for, you should do it. I know it isn't that easy. There are real-world considerations. You have to think about what could go wrong. You have to consider the timing. Where are you going to get the money? What happens if it doesn't work? Is the change you want to make a smart one? Is it a God-inspired change or just something that is fundamentally selfish? What resources are you going to need to accomplish it? Are you moving too fast, or is the change too abrupt?

It is good to ask those questions. You have to think about what you are doing. Rash change is rarely good change. You have to count the costs and consider the risks. That is part of any new adventure. But let's assume you've done that. You have vetted your plan by God, by people you love and trust, and you've adapted to feedback and planned for the unknown. You've prayed about it. But after all the vetting and talking and considering and praying, there is still risk. There is still uncertainty. You still aren't sure. I get it. Really. And that is why I will say it again.

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You should go for it.

Why? Because you were made for this.

Made for what, exactly?

You were made to take risks, to overcome challenges, and to conquer fears.

You were made to move, to change, and to grow. You aren't the first one to be scared. And you won't be the last one. There is help for how to do this. That is what this book is about.

The Bible is a story about how God moved among God's people in history. But it is more than that. It is also a template for how God still moves among people today. When we read stories in the scripture, we are, in a way, reading stories about us. And if there is one *type* of story that is told over and over again, it is migration stories, traveling stories, journeys in which God takes a person or a group of people from one place to another. One of the first people we meet in the Bible, Abram, is an old man who picks up everything and goes on a journey without knowing where he will wind up. The children of Israel go on a journey in the wilderness that not only brings them to the promised land but also forges their faith. Jesus's disciples go on a life-changing journey that starts with the simple words "Follow me." The journeys in the Bible are often geographic, but their primary purpose isn't just to move from one physical location to another. The primary purpose for the journey is personal, emotional, spiritual; the purpose is to take the person from where he or she is to where God intends him or her to be.

We are all on a journey. Maybe your personal journey is

vocational—you don't like what you do and you feel stuck, unable to imagine how much effort it would take to do something new. Maybe you are in a relationship journey—navigating through a divorce, a new marriage, or the death of someone you love. It is hard to imagine what life on the other side looks like. Maybe you are on an emotional journey. The trials you've endured, the tragedies you've suffered, and the transformations you've undergone are taking you somewhere new. They are making you *someone* new. That's a migration. Maybe some of you are dissatisfied with the life you have, or you believe that there has to be more. Maybe some of you have a vision for change; you can almost see what you want your life or your family or your company or your church to look like, but it is going to be a long haul to get there. These are all journeys, migrations from one place to another. And as with any journey, you will need a map, and it helps to have a guide. There is wisdom in listening to people who have traveled the same way.

The most famous migration story in scripture is the Exodus. It is the central story of the Hebrew scriptures. Jewish people still remember and share the story each year at Passover. Christians use the story as the basis for understanding Jesus. It has been depicted in movies for nearly every generation alive today. Why? Because the Exodus isn't just a story about Hebrew slaves migrating to a promised land. It isn't just a story about their journey. It is a story about our journey as well.

The Exodus starts where any good migration story has to start—with a person being convinced that it is time to

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leave home, that it is time to go. That all the excuses—all the reasons why now is not the right time—are lies. The migration starts when we step out and leave what is familiar, comfortable, and predictable. It starts with overcoming inertia and all that keeps us stuck. It starts with a burning bush, something so out of the ordinary that it forces us to finally move. It starts with one person: Moses.

MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH

Before he was a great father of the faith and central figure in the Bible, he was just a guy with a family and a job and a predictable future. But before *that*, he had already lived an eventful life.

You probably know the story. After Pharaoh ordered the killing of all the male babies of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, Moses's mother and sister placed him in a watertight basket and set him in a spot on the Nile where they knew Pharaoh's daughter regularly came to bathe. Just as they had hoped, Pharaoh's daughter found the helpless infant, felt compassion for him, and decided to rescue him even though she suspected that he was one of the Hebrew babies her father had ordered to be killed.

The Bible doesn't even tell us the name of Pharaoh's daughter. But thanks to her act, Moses grows up in Pharaoh's household. He has the lifestyle of a prince of Egypt. Unlike the slaves who harvest Pharaoh's crops and build Pharaoh's cities, Moses gets to eat the choicest food, wear the best clothes, and live in the palace with servants who wait on him.

Yet Moses also becomes aware that he is actually a

Hebrew. Once he knows that, it tears at him to see the way his fellow Israelites are treated. And one day, when he sees an Egyptian brutally beating a Hebrew, he snaps. He kills the Egyptian and buries his body in the sand. But there are witnesses. Pharaoh finds out and plans to have Moses executed.

We have moments when life beckons us to stop because something extraordinary has happened. And God can speak to us there.

So Moses embarks on what is actually the first of several huge journeys in his life. He runs away from Egypt. He ventures out alone into the Sinai Desert. And he winds up in a place called Midian. He starts a new life there and settles down. He gets married. He has a son. He goes to work for his father-in-law, who is a prominent man in the area. He has left all the turmoil of Egypt behind for good. He's in a comfortable routine, and he seems happy with his life. That is, until he finds out that God has other plans and places a call on his life, a call to pick up everything and embark on a new journey.

I remember clearly a day that changed everything for me. It was a day in late March during my senior year of college. I was preparing to graduate from Washington University in

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St. Louis with a degree in mathematics. My emphasis was on theoretical math, to be precise. The time was coming when I had to turn this “theoretical” stuff into practice. I needed to find a job. I had several successful interviews in fields ranging from actuarial science and investment banking to code breaking with the National Security Agency. I just needed to decide which career path was best for me. As I look back now, I see it was an enviable situation. The economy was good, I had several great offers, and all I needed to do was choose. Jobs like these are what my math degree had been preparing me for, and now it was time to take the next step. This should have been easy. Except it wasn't.

I agonized over the decision. My parents had invested a lot of money in my education and rightfully wanted to know my plans for the future. I watched as my classmates and friends decided on graduate schools or job offers. I envied others who knew their next step with such confidence. Then there was me. I was about to have a degree, I had plenty of good opportunities, and yet I felt lost. I had no idea what I wanted to do. Perhaps even worse, I wasn't sure I wanted to do anything. I don't mean that I wanted to just sit around. But I wasn't sure I was ready to grow up, to get a “real job,” and to settle in. But practical concerns were beginning to take over. It was too late to apply to the Peace Corps. I didn't have the money to backpack across Europe and reflect, and I was too proud to move back home to give myself some time to figure it all out. I needed to make a decision, and I couldn't. What I decided here would define the rest of my life—or so I thought. The trajectory of my future could be

dictated by this one choice. My happiness was riding on not screwing this one up. I felt the pressure to choose well, and yet I was frozen by indecision.

Looking back on that time now, I recognize that there are far worse situations to be in. But for me that day, as the pressure mounted and I sensed the swirl of expectations all around me, it felt like the biggest crisis in the world. I suppose that, for me at age twenty-one, it was the one of the biggest crises I had ever faced in my life.

The weight of all of this was on my back that spring day as I walked to the bus stop to head to class. As I sat on the bus and watched buildings zoom by, the bus made a stop, as it always did, right in front of the St. Louis Cathedral. It's a huge, beautiful Romanesque-style Catholic church, and the Basilica was a building I had passed by hundreds of times before. This day was no different, except something happened. As I sat there staring at the church, I heard a voice, not quite audible, but very intelligible. The voice was trying to get my attention. I stared at the building and felt as if it were speaking to me and summoning me to stop what I was doing and to come inside. I promptly got off the bus at the next stop, backtracked, and made my way inside the church.

Once inside, I didn't know what to do. So I sat in silence and just listened. I don't remember how long I was there, maybe thirty minutes. I prayed, and I walked back outside. Nothing seemed to be different as I got back on the bus. But as we pulled away from the stop, I sensed that whatever I was to do next, it was going to have something to do with

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ministry. I sensed on that bus ride that God was telling me to go to seminary. I didn't know where that would lead or what I would end up doing. I didn't even really know what seminary entailed. But I had the sense that it was supposed to be my next step. Up until now, I had never really given this idea any consideration. That is why my parents had a blank look on their face when I told them the news. It is why my friends cocked their head with a puzzled look when I told them of my plans. It is why my fiancée (and now wife) asked me, "Are you sure?" It was because nothing that I had been preparing for had pointed to this. It felt like I was stepping away from everything that I knew I was prepared for and knew I was good at, and I was stepping out without a clear sense of where I was headed. It felt like the beginning of some completely different journey. But it started in the midst of crisis and with the sense that God was speaking to me there. For me, it was a burning-bush experience. Something as routine as passing by a building on the bus turned into something holy, where God got my attention and started me on a new journey.

Have you ever had a burning-bush moment? Have you ever had an experience in which you were going about the daily tasks of life, and then suddenly and rather unexpectedly God used the circumstances of your life to get your attention? That is what happened to Moses one day. Moses was going about his usual routine, tending his father-in-law's sheep, when God used something ordinary to nudge him to consider a journey that was completely unexpected. Here's how the Book of Exodus describes this event:

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. 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. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” 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.” (Exodus 3:1-4 NIV)

I believe that we all have burning-bush moments. Maybe they are messes of our making or circumstances beyond our control. Most often they are some combination of the two. We don't always recognize them for what they are, at least not right away. But we have moments when life beckons us to stop because something extraordinary has happened. And God can speak to us there.

SEVERAL EXCELLENT EXCUSES

I am a firm believer that God still speaks to people. Rarely will God speak through an audible noise (though I wouldn't rule that out). But it is a nudge, a growing internal sense of direction, a developing passion that needs to be followed, or a gnawing discontent that you have to do something about. God still speaks and calls us to leave behind the status quo in our lives and move in a new direction. But in the burning-bush moments of our lives, if we really listen, we can hear.

And who knows? Maybe Moses had a gnawing sense

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all along that he shouldn't just leave his fellow Israelites to their fate. Maybe the sense of injustice that led him to kill the Egyptian had never really gone away. But maybe he had tried to put it all out of his mind, tried to stop listening, until God did something to demand his attention. Once Moses stopped to listen, he heard God speaking out of the bush.

Then the LORD said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7-10)

The assignment was clear. God wanted Moses to leave home, the place where he had gotten comfortable, started a family, worked, and made a life. God wanted him to leave that place behind and go let God use him to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt into a new and more promising land. The assignment was ambitious, but it was clear.

People often lament to me that they wish God would speak to them clearly, the way God did to Moses. We often want to hear God as clearly and audibly as it seems Moses

did. Why can't we have a burning bush, some unmistakable sign from God so we know what we're supposed to do? In the absence of that, we are left wondering whether the nudge is really from God. Is the "call" we are feeling really from God, or is it just our own? We can get paralyzed with this sort of analysis, and more often than not, it is a distraction. It is a stall tactic that keeps us from really having to do what we know we are supposed to do.

And more often than not, the clarity of the call is not our problem. We usually know what we need to do. We have a sense of the direction we need to take. We have clarity about what move we are being asked to consider. Our problem is courage. We know what to do or where to go, we just aren't sure we can do it (or that we even really want to try). So when we are scared, we begin the work of convincing ourselves why we can't do what we know we've been called to do, instead of why we can accomplish it. We come up with excuses about why now is not the right time or why the conditions aren't quite what we need them to be.

We aren't alone in that. It is exactly what Moses did. Upon hearing God call him to travel to Pharaoh and lead the people out of Egypt, Moses immediately begins coming up with excuses about why he can't. His excuses are worth reading because I think we use a lot of the same ones today.

Excuse 1

But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

(Exodus 3:11)

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This is the oldest objection in the book: “There is no way *I* could do something like *that*.” When faced with an opportunity to do something risky or bold in our lives, nearly every one of us will first question our own capacity. This is exactly what is going on with Moses. After absorbing the gravity of what God is calling him to do, his first reaction is to call into question his own abilities. We all do this.

As we start imagining potential challenges, we also start creating reasons why we are likely not to be able to overcome those challenges. We defeat ourselves before we even try.

So many journeys in our life look crazy when they first come to us, whether it is a call to a certain job, the invitation to think about an opportunity, or the daydream we have about a new direction in our life. Almost immediately we start talking ourselves out of it; we start listing reasons why *we* can't do *that*. We run into a lot of fears over the course of our journey, but perhaps the first one is the fear of inadequacy. We get scared. The opportunity or call sounds exciting, but who are we to do it? We question everything from our ability to our capacity. Perhaps deep down we are afraid of looking silly, afraid of failing, or afraid of having to confront some of our own shortcomings. Whatever the

reason, if you ever find yourself wondering if you can do something like that, then you know what Moses was up against.

Excuse 2

But Moses said to God, “If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they are going to ask me, ‘What’s this God’s name?’ What am I supposed to say to them?”

(Exodus 3:13)

Now Moses turns his attention to what other people might think of this idea. If Moses actually says yes, he is going to have to tell his wife, his family, and his friends about his plan. Furthermore, when he gets to Egypt, he is going to have to convince the Hebrew elders and leaders of this whole burning-bush call. Ideas can seem fine in the private space of prayer but can suddenly sound crazy in the light of day. So Moses starts to consider the potential reactions people might have, and he comes up with his next objection. What is the essence of this excuse? I really think that, for Moses, he is already beginning to think about those who will doubt him. What is he supposed to do about the doubters?

I (unfortunately) think about doubters and people who will be skeptical of my plans more than I care to admit. I bet you do too. We are all concerned to some extent with what others will think of us. When it comes to a dramatic change in our life, it is natural to begin wondering what

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others will think. Some people will certainly question us or our sanity or both. And if they do question us, what are we going to say? In Moses's case, he imagines having to tell a group of Hebrew slaves that God has sent him to free them. They are almost certainly going to be skeptical; there are going to be doubters. They might even laugh in his face. The people are going to want to know who this "god" is who sent Moses. They are going to think he is crazy. Who wants to set themselves up for that?

The same thing will happen with us. As soon as we go public with a big change in our lives, inevitably there are going to be people around us who think we are nuts, especially if we bring faith into the decision. There are always doubters. Knowing how to deal with doubters, and what to say to them, can be intimidating, especially when we are questioning ourselves right alongside them.

Excuse 3

Then Moses replied, "But what if they don't believe me or pay attention to me? They might say to me, 'The LORD didn't appear to you!'"

(Exodus 4:1)

This objection really is an extension of the previous one. As soon as you admit that you sense God calling you to do something new in your life, people will wonder what voice you are really listening to. They'll want to know, "Who is this so-called god?" Is it the god of restlessness, the god of dissatisfaction, the god of running away, or the god of immediate gratification? Is this voice we are supposedly

listening to really God, or is it merely our own? People who love us will ask this. It is a fair question.

Moses knows that he will hear these questions as soon as he shares this crazy-sounding idea. When he tells people that God told him to do it, they are going to wonder. They are going to have trouble believing it, and they may even accuse Moses of simply using God to do something that is self-serving. Moses is putting this question in the mouths of others, but I suspect that even Moses himself questioned whether he was really hearing from God. Was the idea to go to Egypt a divine voice? Or was this simply Moses giving voice to his own desire? Can Moses be sure that the voice he hears isn't coming from inside his own head, speaking to him from some kind of daydream about freeing his people from their plight?

That is a hard question. Like Moses, I often wonder if a decision I am about to make is from God or from my own heart. A few years ago, I led our congregation through a discernment process about our church facilities. After much prayer, discussion, and study, I believed that God was calling our church to build a new church facility. The project was ambitious, the cost was greater than anything we had ever done before, and the process was going to take years. Despite the challenges, I was convinced that this was the direction God wanted our church to take. But I was scared to share that with people. They almost certainly would question how I knew it was God's will. What if it was just my idea? What "god" was telling me to do this?

The same will be true for you after your own burning-bush

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experience. When you do something big, immediately people are going to start questioning your idea and especially how you arrived at this decision. In these moments, we will question what voice we are really listening to and whether or not we really heard from God at all.

Excuse 4

But Moses said to the LORD, “My Lord, I’ve never been able to speak well, not yesterday, not the day before, and certainly not now since you’ve been talking to your servant. I have a slow mouth and a thick tongue.”

(Exodus 4:10)

I call this a technical objection. Moses considers what God wants him to do and comes up with what he thinks is the ideal excuse. He doesn’t speak well. Maybe he stutters. He’s not going to be able to inspire the people with a stirring speech the way a great leader could. God wants him to go back and tell Pharaoh something. Perfect. Moses would love to do this, except for one little thing: he isn’t good at talking. So instead of getting creative, offering to learn, or asking God for help, Moses just bows out. “I would love to help you out, God, but I have a thick tongue so it won’t work. I guess you’ll need to find somebody else.”

It is almost comical to hear Moses’s lack of creativity when it comes to answering God’s call. As he mulls the idea over in his head, Moses wants to bail at the first sign of difficulty. It is as if speaking eloquently is the biggest challenge in this whole endeavor. Talking well is the least

of Moses's concerns, but he fixates on that, and it becomes his reason not to respond. It would be funny if it weren't so true.

We do the same thing in our own lives. When we are called to make a change or head out in a new and uncertain direction, it is natural to begin anticipating what the challenges and obstacles might be. And to a certain degree it might be healthy to look ahead and think about the obstacles we might face. But that can also get us into trouble. As we start imagining potential challenges, we also start creating reasons why we are likely not to be able to overcome those challenges. Pretty soon, if we aren't careful, we can come up with imaginary reasons why we can't overcome imaginary problems. We defeat ourselves before we even try.

Excuse 5

But Moses said, "Please, my Lord, just send someone else."

(Exodus 4:13)

This one really isn't even an excuse as much as it is an outright objection—or maybe a confession. "God, can't you just find someone else to do this? I really can't and don't want to."

In my line of work, I have a lot of occasions to ask people to consider doing things that are outside their comfort zone. Maybe it is speaking in public, praying with others, or playing music in front of an entire congregation. Like Moses, they will often rehearse their reasons and excuses

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about why they can't accommodate the request. On a good day, I will address and answer every one of these objections. And they often will say something like this: "Well, I'll tell you what, if you can't find anyone else to do it, then maybe I will consider it."

Have you ever said that? I know that I have. It is a more polite form of Moses's plea. "God, can't you find someone else?" And certainly God could have found someone. God could have asked anyone. But the fact remains that God asked Moses to do it. This isn't a call for other people. It is a call for Moses, and Moses will have to reckon with it.

*When we're called to embark on
some journey in life, we need
to remember to factor God
into our calculations.*

Similarly, we can get distracted when considering change in our life. And sometimes we just wish that someone else could do it. Often, a call in our life starts out as a dissatisfaction with the way things are—and the belief that maybe we could do something about it.

In 2015 Michael Brown Jr. was shot by a police officer in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. The news went global, and suddenly white people were faced with questions that they preferred to ignore. Suddenly, many people were waking up to the ways that racism has infected everything from

municipal court practices to police profiling. Many people in my church and all around St. Louis began asking how they could respond.

I listened to a lot of bold ideas, courageous ways in which people felt called to make a difference. But as is often the case with big, overwhelming, systemic issues, it is easy for initial enthusiasm to wane. I would often hear people assume that somewhere, out there, in a city full of millions, someone else was certainly on top of this. That person was likely better qualified, had more expertise, had the time, and was better positioned to bring the idea to fruition. Without expressing it quite like Moses did, we often assume that, if we come up with an important idea, certainly God has someone else better qualified who can do the job.

As I read Moses's excuses, I am reminded of how easy it is for me to do the same when confronted with a journey that seems overwhelming and daunting. I share a lot of the same excuses that Moses offered to God (and several that he didn't). So what are your excuses? As you consider a big change in your life and feel the fear welling up inside you, what are the objections you have raised to yourself? I bet some of you are telling yourself the timing is just not right. You would do it, and you want to do it, and one day you *will* do it, but now isn't the right time. Maybe you need to get through school, get the wedding over with, wait until the kids go off to college, or hold off until you have more financial security. Maybe it is a busy season for you, or you have too much on your plate already. Maybe you need to be there for your parents, kids, or friends. Maybe you'll do it

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as soon as this project is over or tax season is through. The list goes on. I understand that.

For some of us, maybe what holds us back are concerns about resources. We don't have the money, or the sacrifice would be too costly for us. For some of us, the issue is comfort. We fear giving up the known for the unknown. For some of us, it may be the security of the status quo that keeps us from responding.

But behind all of Moses's objections was really one fear—the fear of inadequacy. Ultimately, Moses was afraid that he would fail. He was afraid that he didn't have the skills, knowledge, leadership, or capability to do what God was calling him to do. (And who among us would not have felt the same way? God wasn't just asking Moses to take on a new role in his life. He was asking him to go back to a place he had left years ago fearing for his life. He was asking him to go the court of Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler on earth, and tell him to release thousands of Israelites from slavery.)

Moses was afraid that, if people questioned him, he wouldn't have answers they could believe. He was scared that his effort would be met with challenges that he couldn't overcome. He was scared that he didn't have the gifts and skills that he would need to complete the task. He was scared that, although he wanted to do something significant, he wasn't actually the best person for the mission. Certainly someone, somewhere, would be better than him. All of this is the fear of inadequacy. It is a fear of not having what it takes. It is a fear of failing. But it is more than failing at a

task. It is the fear of finding out that we failed as people, that we couldn't do it. And that fear keeps so many of us from stepping out in the first place. We would rather maintain the illusion that we could have done it but simply chose not to. We're so afraid of falling short that we don't even try.

While Moses was so busy coming up with reasons why he couldn't do it, he was ignoring all the reasons why he was actually the perfect candidate for the job. Moses was made for this. In fact, if anyone was ideal for the job of going to Pharaoh, it was Moses. He knew Pharaoh personally. He knew how Pharaoh thought. Because he had grown up in the royal palace, he knew the ways of the court and how the bureaucracy worked. And as an Israelite, he knew about the sufferings of his people. When God called on him, all that Moses could think about were reasons why he was the wrong choice. But in the midst of Moses's excuses, God saw a different reality. There's a lesson in that for us, too. Our own doubts and anxieties may cause us to miss the different reality that God recognizes but we can't yet see. Maybe there's a reason God called us into something new. Maybe we actually were made for this.

If you are contemplating something new and bold in your life, the fear of inadequacy will hit you just as it hit Moses. Your objections may be unique to your situation, but the underlying fear is one that we all face. Facing this fear is where we begin, because unless we overcome it, we will never even get to experience what the journey is really like. And don't forget: while you might be spending all this time and energy thinking up excuses why you can't do it,

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you may be ignoring all the reasons why you are actually perfect for this journey!

So how did God respond to Moses? What did God say that ultimately led Moses, even with all of his objections, to say yes and go back to Egypt? What was it that led Moses to step away from home and job, family and friends, safety and security, and head out to a place that would stir up every fear? The answer is surprisingly simple. While God responded to each one of Moses's objections in a specific way, there was really only one response. Just as there was one underlying fear with Moses, there was one overarching response from God: "I will be with you."

Think about it. When Moses first objected to God, what did God say?

But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God said, "I'll be with you." (Exodus 3:11-12a)

When Moses wondered about God's name, or asked about doubters, or confessed his inability to speak, in each instance God's promise was the same. I will be there with you. *I will give you my name, I will perform signs through you, I will give you the power to do things you couldn't otherwise do, and I will lift up others to help you.* In other words, God said to Moses: "You are scared of not being enough, of being inadequate, of not having the skills or not being able to overcome the challenges. But here's the thing: you aren't doing this alone." That is the whole point of Moses's call story. Moses is weighing all the options *as if* he

has to do this whole thing alone. But God is making it clear that he *doesn't* have to do it alone. What Moses is forgetting to factor into his calculations is the power of God. Moses doesn't have the power to convince the Israelites to listen, but God does. Moses doesn't have the power to make an impression on Pharaoh, but God does.

When we're called to embark on some journey in life, we need to remember to factor God into our calculations too. Here's the thing. God doesn't call us to do things that we can accomplish on our own. God doesn't call us to surmount obstacles, accept challenges, go through transitions, make changes, or set out on journeys that we have the capacity to manage all on our own. What would be the point? No. God always calls us to do things that we *cannot* do on our own. Why? Because these journeys require God, will teach us to rely on God, and will remind us that God is with us. These journeys, like the one Moses is being called to begin, are impossible if we embark on them alone. That is why we are scared. That is why we feel inadequate. That is why we are nervous and stalling. But we've forgotten. We aren't doing this alone. And that knowledge changes everything.

It shouldn't be lost on us that, when God sent Jesus into the world to save us, the name given to him in the Gospel of Matthew was Emmanuel, which means "God with us." And it isn't a mistake that at the very end of that same gospel, the last words that Jesus spoke were these: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20 NRSV).

Nearly every person in the Bible who began a significant

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journey had the same basic fear—that they weren't enough. And every time God's promise has remained the same, "I am with you." Nearly forty years after Moses would lead the people through the desert, the next generations of Israelites were scared to cross the river Jordan and enter into the promised land. Their leader, Moses's protégé, Joshua, confessed this fear to God. God's words back to Joshua have inspired generations of people over thousands of years to endure, overcome, or accomplish the impossible. We will close this chapter, and begin our journey, with the same words. Read them as if they were written to you and for you, because they were. "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9 NIV).