

Sermon for 3 Lent C
Good Shepherd, Wareham
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Today's theme is work. These days, there seem to be two types of workers—those who are overworked and highly stressed, and those who are unemployed or underemployed—and highly stressed. On the one hand, you have people who are working long hours, possibly taking on extra work from those who have been let go, and worried about their own job security. On the other hand, you have people who are not working or are working in less than ideal circumstances, worried about paying bills, going through the stress of seeking work, or perhaps just despairing of finding work. Is there anybody out there who is happy and working just enough?

And don't tell me retired people. Sure, some retirees are very relaxed and happy. But I don't know how many people have told me, "I'm busier since I retired than I ever was working!" And of course, stay-at-home parents have the hardest job of all, since that is 24-7.

Work has become **the** American Idol. We define ourselves by our work. Work and career are seen as the American Way of Life—and the harder you work, the more money you make, so the more you can buy. That's been the idea, anyway. And, the story goes, if you're a woman, you really can have it all—marriage, career, family! Yes, if you take sleep out of the equation.

But does this work-centered way of life lead to success, happiness, or does it just lead to stress? The Japanese actually have a word, *karoshi*, which means "death from overwork." They have statistics on who dies suddenly from stress, usually via heart attack or stroke. And why do we work so much? Yes, we need to pay our bills, but where does the value and meaning of our work come from?

With the economy in upheaval, we actually may be given an opportunity to rethink our relationship to work. If we work less than we want, if we have to work in less than ideal employment, if we can't work or if we've made a terrible mess of our life, we will be confronted with questions such as "Where is my self-worth outside of work?" "What gives meaning to my life?" in addition to practical questions such as "How am I going to pay my bills?" and "Where is God now?" Either way, if you hit burn out or you aren't happy in work—not enough, not the kind you want—you have a chance to go deeper, wonder about what you are doing.

We have a wonderful example of life-crisis in Moses. Moses was adopted into the Egyptian royal family. He received an education, wealth, privilege as a prince. Later on, he became aware of his heritage as a Hebrew, and he saw how cruelly his own people were being treated. They were slaves, forced to make bricks for Egyptian building projects. One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, so he killed the Egyptian man. As a fugitive, he fled to the desert, leaving everything behind—wealth, power, family. It looked like his glorious career was over—and possibly his life.

In the desert, he fell in with a family of nomadic herders—Midians—and he married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro. Moses took on the family work, and also became a herder. In the desert, he had lots of time to contemplate his life and mistakes.

It was as he was watching the flocks that he saw the amazing sight of a bush on fire but not burning up. He goes over to look closer and encounters God. "I am God, the God of the Hebrew

people, and I have a job for you. Go back to your people in Egypt and bring them away into the desert here.”

Think about it. Moses has utterly messed up his life—he murdered a man, he’s a fugitive from Egypt, he lost all the wealth and family connection he has known. And this is the person whom God has chosen for the greatest job in history. Is the Lord nuts? Not at all. Moses knows Egypt and his way around court—he has to speak to Pharaoh, after all. He is a Hebrew, and has a heart for his people. He also has spent decades now out in the wilderness, and knows how to survive in the desert. He has all the qualities God needs--**and** he has learned humility, his need of God. Or at least he will be able to learn that, the Lord knows. So God says, “Moses, I am sending you to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But instead of saying, “Sure thing, God, that’ll be great,” Moses says, “You want me to do WHAT??! Who am I—murderer and mess-up—that I should do this?” And God says, “I will be with you.” Moses keeps complaining and asking, “But who shall I say sent me?” And God says, “I AM WHO I AM.” How do you like that for a name? How do you argue with someone named “I AM”? But Moses actually keeps arguing with the Lord until the Lord gets fed up and answers every objection. Because the Lord has thought this through. Moses is the one chosen for this work, work unlike anything he’s ever done before, yet work that he has been preparing for his whole life. He will use his knowledge of the court to seek out and speak to Pharaoh. He will be a leader, as he was in Egypt. He will shepherd a whole people, instead of just sheep, and guide them through the desert. But all of these actions will have a new meaning. He will not just be exercising power or making a living, but he will allow himself to be used by God. To rescue his people. To reveal the power of God.

More than anything else, this new job will require him to rely on the Lord. Utterly. To take his direction from God, to be a conduit of God’s wisdom and power to the people. Moses will be schooled in trusting God, through any number of terrifying and difficult situations. This is his life’s work.

What does this story have to do with us? This very place where our lives seem to fall apart may be the place where God is calling us to something new. It may be that our life work will be revealed or that we will be sent out in a new way. Whatever we have done or learned, God can use that. I’m convinced that God is the ultimate recycler! Yes, we need to pay bills and buy food, and God knows that, but our true work, paid or unpaid, comes from God’s ability to use our gifts in a way that both brings joy to us and service to the world. As the song says, quoting Scripture: Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you—Allelu, alleluia.

Sometimes, what we are doing already has great significance, but we fail to value what God values. Rachel Naomi Remen is a doctor who counsels people with cancer, and also counsels medical doctors. Two stories come from her book, My Grandfather’s Blessings (Riverhead Books, New York, 2000). In the first, she mentions Joe, an internist who served on an AIDS ward in an inner-city hospital, back when a diagnosis of AIDS was an automatic death sentence. (“Being Used,” p. 92). She writes, “Many of (the patients) were young men quite close to his own age, people whose lives mattered deeply to him. After a few months of this, he became overwhelmed by a sense of futility. . . .”

“Joe happens to be a Buddhist, and it has always been his practice to pray for his patients. When a patient dies even now, he lights a candle on his altar at home and keeps it burning for a month. For the whole time he has at San Francisco General, he prayed for each dying young man and lit a candle on his altar for them. . . It has made him wonder. Perhaps the reason he was there was not what he had

thought. He had expected to serve by curing and rescuing his patients. When their problems proved resistant to his medical expertise, he had felt useless. But maybe he was not meant to be there to cure people. Perhaps he was there so that no one would die without someone to pray for them. Perhaps he had served every one of his patients flawlessly.”

Another doctor had to see his work differently. Josh, a skilled cancer surgeon, came to see Rachel for depression. He was disillusioned about his work and considered early retirement. Rachel asked him write down the answers to 3 questions every night in a journal: What surprised me today? What moved me or touched me today? What inspired me today? He agreed to try. (“Finding New Eyes” p. 116-119) After 3 days, he called Rachel with his answers: “The answer is always the same: Nothing. Nothing and nothing. I don’t like to fail at things. Is there a trick to this?”

“Perhaps you are still looking at your life in old ways,’ (she) told him. ‘Try looking at the people around you as if you were a novelist, a journalist, or maybe a poet. Look for their stories.’

“He had trouble with the journal at the beginning and had wondered at how he could be so busy and living such an empty life. (But after six weeks) he had begun to find some answers to the three questions. He opened the journal and began to read some of them

“At first, the most surprising thing in a day was that a cancer had grown or shrunk two or three millimeters, and the most inspiring thing was that a new or experimental drug had begun to work. But gradually he had begun to see more deeply. Eventually he saw people who had found their way through great pain and darkness by following a thread of love, people who had sacrificed parts of their bodies to affirm the value of being alive, people who had found way to triumph over pain, suffering, and even death. . . . (He affirmed that) ‘when I began to see things differently, my attitude started to change . . . and after a while, I just began talking to people about more than their cancer and its treatment. I began talking about what I could see.’

When he was treating a 38-year old woman with ovarian cancer, who had been through major surgery followed by devastating chemotherapy, he “saw for the first time her four-year-old on her lap and her six-year-old leaning against her chair. both little girls were shiny clean, well fed, happy, and obviously well loved. Aware of the profound suffering caused by her sort of chemotherapy, he was deeply moved by the depth of her commitment to mother her children, and for the first time he connected it to the strength of her will to live. . . . ‘You are such a great mother to your kids,’ he told her. ‘Even after all you have been through, there is something very strong in you. I think that power could maybe heal you someday.’ ‘Thank you,’ she told him warmly. ‘That means a lot to me.’”

This surgeon changed the way he saw his patients and his work. His patients responded to his care, and he found himself more and more used in a profoundly life-giving way. He himself found life in his work, beyond curing to healing.

How is God calling you in your work? What is your work? Wherever you are, stop and listen for God’s voice. It may not come in a burning bush, but it can change your life and others’. Let us pray. AMEN.