

“What Do You Have in Your Hand?”

Exodus 4: 1-5

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My name is Bruce and I'm experiencing something I've never done before. I've become your Bridge Pastor. Accepting this position for a year or so is a big change in my life. It is a change for this congregation. We are learning to adjust to these changes together.

Change is inevitable, but it is not easy. As we head into major change as a congregation this fall, I am thinking of Spencer Johnson's book, *Who Moved My Cheese?*, a story about two mice and two little people as small as mice. All four of them run a maze each day in order to find their cheese. The author tells us that for the little people, the cheese "meant feeling safe, having a loving family ... and living in a cozy cottage on Cheddar Lane" (p. 34). Each day the little people find their cheese in exactly the same place in the maze. They get into a very efficient rut of running the maze to get to the cheese. They do not need to run risks, explore, or think creatively. All they need to do is head confidently through the maze to the same location. One day, however, the cheese is gone! It has been moved to another part of the maze.

The mice, Sniff and Scurry, realized quickly the rules of the game had changed so they responded by running through the rest of the maze until they found the cheese in the new location. The little people, however, reacted by ranting and raving at the injustice of it all. For days they continued going through the same routines as though nothing had really changed. They kept returning to the same place, even though it was now obvious that the cheese was gone. Eventually they become depressed that things are just not the way they were in the good old days.

By the end of the story the two little people, named Hem and Haw, discover that they must change in order to adapt to their new situation.

As we reflect on the way things change our response to changes, let's take a Bible story from Moses' life as God calls him to lead the Hebrew nation from Pharaoh's slavery. Today we are considering what resources we need in order to successfully navigate

transitional times in our own lives. Moses did not think he had the resources he needed to lead the Hebrew nation through transition.

Then Moses answered, 'But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, "The Lord did not appear to you." ' The Lord said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.' And he said, 'Throw it on the ground.' So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail'—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— 'so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you' (Exodus 4:1-5).

One of the ways we often respond in a time of transition is to focus on the pinch of scarce resources. We become fearful that we can't do what is needed because we still need something else to get started. A classic example comes from the presidency of President Abraham Lincoln. At the beginning of the war, Lincoln appointed General George McClellan to head up the northern armies. McClellan insisted that he needed more troops before he could go to battle, so President Lincoln recruited more troops. McClellan then said he needed more wagons. Lincoln provided the wagons. Next it was horses. Over the weeks and even months, it was one thing after another. McClellan was constantly preparing his army while demanding more resources. They marched back and forth, in practice drills, but he refused to lead them into battle. Finally, in a fit of frustration, President Lincoln wrote a note to General McClellan, "If you're not planning on using the army, may I borrow it?"

Like General McClellan, we often fail to step out in faith in new circumstances because we fear that we lack the resources needed to do whatever it is God asks us to do. While this is true about life in general, it is even more of a factor during times of significant transition. When it feels like God is changing the rules of the game it is normal to respond by first continuing to do what we are already doing but doing it more often, trying harder, improving our efficiency. The other option is to complain that it isn't fair that God is asking us to do something we have never done before. This was Moses' situation.

Moses was comfortable in his role as shepherd and nomad. He had settled into life in the dessert. He was now a family man with a wife and children. Earlier he had a shot at leadership under Pharaoh. But he chose his own Hebrew people over the wealth of the palace. On top of that he made a couple mistakes. OK, maybe more than a mistake to lose his temper and murder that Egyptian slave-driver. He had gone from being a Prince to becoming a fugitive on the run. Hey, that's life. You win some, you lose some. Now, in mid-life, he had settled down. Life was good. Not great, but good. Then God spoke to him from the burning bush.

God told Moses to return to Pharaoh and lead the people out of their slavery so they could become a nation and travel to the Promised Land. Moses immediately debates God's call.

Moses responds by claiming that he lacks the resources needed to lead God's people out of slavery. He can't speak in public. The people don't trust him. How could he possibly become God's leader to release his people from slavery?

God listened to Moses and then answered Moses' complaints with an interesting question. "What is that in your hand?" Moses looked at his hand and answered, "A shepherd staff." God then showed Moses that the staff was all he needed if he would rely on God.

God told Moses to throw the staff on the ground and it miraculously became a snake. Then God told Moses to grab the snake by its tail and it turned back into a stick. The Lord used these physical miracles to change Moses' thinking. The real miracle went beyond the physical stick and snake. God opened Moses' mind to creatively become aware of his resources. God invited Moses to think of the wood staff as dynamic and alive, not merely a dead piece of wood. Moses's staff reminded him that he was already a leader of sheep and goats, good practice for leading God's people.

A year or so later Moses is leading the Israelites to the Red Sea to gain freedom from the Pharaoh. They arrive at the waters and discover Pharaoh's army is chasing them. What to do? They are trapped ahead by the waters, trapped behind by the Egyptian army. Moses asks God, "What do I do?" God says, "You have the staff in your hand. Hold it out over the waters." That night the waters parted so Israel could cross on dry land and then the waters returned to drown Pharaoh's army.

I have a question for us today. What do we have in our hands? What resources could God use miraculously if we opened our thinking to God's creativity?

This same kind miracle of discovering surprising resources when God opens our minds to the possibilities is repeated other times in the Bible. A widow approached Elisha for help. Her husband had left her in such debt that she would have to sell her two sons into slavery. Elisha knew God's miraculous power to take one's resources and use what we already have when we trust it to God. So he asked her what she had in her house. She thought for a moment and then said that all she had left was a little pot of oil in the kitchen. Elisha responded that she should send her sons to collect empty pots from the neighbors. When they came back with lots of pots, Elisha instructed her to pour the oil from her small pot into the borrowed pots. The oil kept pouring and pouring until all the rest of the pots were filled. She sent the boys back out into the neighborhood to give her neighbors their pots now filled with oil. The neighbors thanked them and gave the family money for the oil. God used what she already had available—oil—to re-connect her with her neighbors and community.

King Hezekiah inherited a nation in spiritual depression. The people were simply going through the motions of faith with no real energy. He considered his resources and decided that their greatest untapped resource was the temple building of Jerusalem and the priests

who were still on the payroll to lead worship. The temple sat in disrepair. Most of the rooms were simply used for storage. Most of the space was dusty and covered with spider's webs.

Hezekiah insisted the priests clean up the temple. As they began the housecleaning, God renewed their minds. Over the next few months the nation experienced a revival of hope and spiritual energy. It began when God opened the hearts of the people see the resources they already had.

What do you have in your hand? As a congregation, as individuals, how could God use our current resources in some surprising ways?

Last month I sat in on Pastor Kim's farewell Session meeting. One of her closing remarks to the elders struck me. She commented that where Market Square chooses to place its resources, the ministries are outstanding. I listened and reflected on two of the areas I appreciate as I arrive in this setting. You have the resources of this amazing building, with wonderful acoustics, an amazing organ and musicians. You use these resources in such glorious ways not only for regular worship, but also for blessing the community by multiplying these resources into the ministry of Arts on the Square.

You also have the resource of your location downtown in the city of Harrisburg. You use this geographical resource to develop an amazing ministry of feeding hundreds of our unhoused neighbors multiple times each week. Not only the incredible Sunday morning breakfast program, but now Friday evenings and I don't even know all the various ways we bless the community by watching God multiply our resources.

So, here we are entering this year of transition together awaiting a new installed pastor. While we wait, let's ask ourselves the question, "What do we have in our hands?"