

Greeting AllianceQ family and thank you for this generous invitation. I am Rev. April Johnson, your Minister of Reconciliation. Thank you for this opportunity to offer a message on this special emphasis Sunday for Reconciliation Ministry and to co-laborate with you.

Will you pray with me?

Lord in your mercy, here my prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. May your message find fertile ground and your messenger move out of the way that your voice will be heard and received. In Jesus name I pray. Amen

“Listen God is calling; through the word inviting. Offering forgiveness, comfort and joy.”

This is the refrain to a Tanzanian folk hymn, usually sung as the congregation stands to receive the reading of the Gospel lesson. It is sung in call and response style typical of the African worship oral tradition of music. Many hymns in that tradition were not written down because the worshippers learned by hearing.

In the process of listening, one was also preparing. Preparing to respond and to act according to specifics of the call. In a similar fashion, there is a Negro spiritual “Hush, Hush. Somebody’s Calling My Name” was originally unwritten nor keyed to notes but sung as a matter of course daily in the cotton fields by African slaves in the Deep South in the 19th century. It too had a call and response nature to its melody and meaning. The Negro spiritual as we now understand was replete with double entendre or dual meaning. It was sung as a work song in the tobacco, cotton and sugar cane fields while the slaves attended to picking and cutting the crop. They sang it to ring out the assurance of salvation – that God was with them to usher them to the Promised Land. The song offers that even despite their tenuous condition their name was written in the book of life in heaven. It was sung to signal the fact that someone’s time had come to make the dangerous journey to leave master’s field and hit the Underground Railroad in hope for a life of freedom. The call and response rhythm of the song maintained the anonymity of the one whose name had be called to escape. If everybody is singing, no one person could be singled out. “Hush, Hush, Somebody’s Calling My Name. Oh my Lord, (as the song goes) Oh my Lord, what shall I Do?”

I am reminded of the call and response nature of our faith life as I read and re-read today’s Old Testament lesson in Numbers chapter 11.

As you may know, the book of Numbers is the chronicle of the experience of the Hebrew Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt. It describes their sojourn- their encampment and journeying - through desert and the plains from Sinai to the Jordan River. The book of Numbers also chronicles the Israelites and their tenuous relationship with God in the wilderness, it established their rituals and their wanderings, their faith, and their tendency toward self-reliance and sabotage. It describes how they were led by God through the appearance of a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud rested on a place, there they would camp. When the cloud lifted, they would move out. It is here we find the Moses, the leader/prophet listening to the people at the doors of their tents complaining about the Lord's provisions for their journey toward Promised Land. They are longing for the days of old when they were slaves in Egypt. In this scene that we are allowed to drop in, things are getting tight. Everyone is frustrated. The people are frustrated murmuring and complaining about manna, manna, manna. Moses is frustrated reminding God he did not call himself nor did he birth these ungrateful Israelites. God is frustrated with the Israelites ignoring God's largess and love.

In the spirit of full transparency, I resonate deeply with the leader/prophet Moses in this text. Keeping in that same spirit of transparency, in other times I find myself fully in the camp of the Israelites, longing for good old days – that in reality were not that good at all. My hope for this message is that you will see yourself in characters of this text and desire to evolve, to move forward, as you consider embracing God’s call over and over again.

“Listen God is calling; through the word inviting. Offering forgiveness, comfort and joy.”

When we step into this text, we find Moses attempting to convince God that the burden of leadership is more than he can bear. Listen as Moses laments to God in verse 12 and following:

“Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?

Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”

How often do we find ourselves in this thankless role of leadership? Some of us don’t even recognize that we are the leader for the times and the places we

navigate. We are navigating a wilderness experience in our current societal reality. There are numerous barriers to our modern day prophetically imagined Promised Land. The least of which is the COVID-19 pandemic. We are facing crises of integrity of our democracy, effective stewardship of our natural resources, human rights and access to full human flourishing is in crisis. The divisive language on our red and blue news outlets, the conflict mediation mechanism sponsored by Smith and Wesson, and the movement from #metoo to #youcanttellmewhattodo is exhausting. Who would want to lead in times such as this! Yet, “the earth is groaning for the revealing of the children of God.” The earth is craving leadership in these times and we like Moses, find this too much to bear.

I believe this scripture is a leadership narrative. And it is not simply describing Moses as the resistant leader/prophet. It describes the nature of leadership and that true leadership emerges from a posture of reverence toward God. Like the Israelites in our story today, who were craving meat, fish, leeks, onions and garlic, we are craving for substance in the ways we relate to each other and the world. I

contend this substance is not found in denying each others' full humanity, nor in Big Pharma, or the billionaire space race – it is found in seeking the face of God and preparing ourselves to heed God's call as we all journey to the metaphorical Promised Land.

We are the ones we are waiting for.

This story of Moses and the Israelites is an accurate description of the life of a leader.

Moses, the leader/prophet is expressing two extremes that occurred in the wilderness with the Israelites and with us who are called to listen and follow God: First he expresses extreme fatigue with ministry. This is a cry to convince God that it is time to throw in the towel. Have you ever felt like this. God, can I tap out for a few while someone else does the parenting? God, can you find someone else to teach this class because I feel woefully inadequate? God, can you find someone else to do disability advocacy, or racial justice advocacy because it's hard to convince these people to do the work. (Oh, well that one was mine!). I hear Moses saying "Let's just call it, right here in this no man's land. These complaining people, the lack of progress, these people who are the first to doubt and the last to affirm. These people and I are done. Moses is trying to convince God with this extreme anecdote of him birthing children. Moses is

deflecting hoping that God will see just how ridiculous guiding these people to an unknown place through an unknown pathway really is and maybe someone else will can take it from here.

The second observation from Moses' lament is that the call to leadership is not to a select few. It is a call to all of us. And it is burdensome. But it is a holy burden. Moses says to God, "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me." When God calls us, God gives us a burden – a passion for mission to deliver not just ourselves but the people impacted by inequities and injustice to the Promised Land. God gives us Holy Burdens.

Holy burdens have these attributes:

First, they involve the people of God, those who confess and proclaim identity in God. People who have holy burdens, believe in God and seek God's will for their passion to co-create with God communities that are compassionate and just. They seek to improve the conditions of people who are without voice to advocate for their own flourishing. Moses' wanted the Israelites to want liberation as much as he wanted for them. Their freedom was Moses' burden.

Second, it involves loving when liking the people may not be possible. It is big picture leadership and ministry. Listen to God's response to Moses' lament. God listens to Moses' concern and complaint. The text indicates that God does not respond to the personal ruminations of Moses and the extreme parallel to him birthing and mothering children. Instead, God responds to the systemic concern. God gives Moses the big picture, without acknowledging the burden, God still responds to it. God not only hears our burdens for our mission and ministry, but God gives us holy/prophetic imagination to carry them. "Gather 70 elders and bring them into the tent of meeting." God says gather the people who are likewise burdened with a passion for justice, equity, and life-giving action, and invite them to join you in God's mission. This is how reverence for God and listening to God calling helps us grow and expand our confidence, mission, and ministry.

Which leads me to the third attribute of Holy burdens. It relies on God's faithfulness to see mission and purpose through. After God instructs Moses to gather the seventy elders to relieve him of the burden of solo leadership, some of the Spirit of God that was on Moses, falls on the seventy elders and they prophesy. They proclaim God's holy burden that is for the people who crave the meat of liberation.

God wants us to rely and to look to God to strengthen our hands, hearts, and feet for the promised land. Moses responded to the prophesy of the elders, “would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

I believe this is the key to the pathway to the promised land because it confirms our call that all people have a prophetic imagination and a call to lead.

There **IS** a dearth of leadership in these time in which we live. And the time is always right to do what is right. This means that we must listen and trust that God is calling, with the work inviting us to holy burdens and leadership. The invitation is to each of us. This is not about there being too many cooks in the kitchen. Instead, this is about developing more leaders, more cooks with courage and creativity.

Moses is not coming back to lead us. Dr. King is not coming back to lead us to the promised land, but he left us this legacy in his last message on the eve of his demise:

– as Dr. King said, I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.”

We have to interpret the promised land broader and deeper today. We have to think wider and higher than re-appropriating “other people’s stuff.” We are the ones that we are waiting for. ARE you waiting for a voting rights that do not discriminate? Are you waiting for access for every ability? Are you waiting to see poverty and white supremacy dismantled and disrupted? What is the promised land for your holy burden, your mission, your call? If you go to the mountain top and look over, what and who will you see?

Hush, Hush, Somebody’s Calling Your Name.

May it be so!

Let us pray.

Loving and merciful God, Holy is your name. God as we gather on this call this morning, we give you thanks and praise for the blessing of this day. This is the day that you have made and we will be glad and rejoice in it. God we thank you for the power and privilege of prayer. Hear our pray, Lord. Forgive us we pray for any sins of omission and commission. Things we have done and let undone, said or left unsaid.