

**A Sermon for The Third Sunday of Lent
March 23, 2025**



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[Third Sunday in Lent – The Episcopal Church](#)

Exodus 3:1-15

Imperative

Moses receives a direct order from God, an imperative: Go to Egypt and deliver my people from slavery. Moses is reluctant, but the message was delivered to him in a very persuasive way. The voice of God came out of a burning bush! Moses thought of lots of excuses why he could not carry out this mission, but God overruled all Moses' objections. Go! You are the one! And Moses went.

There are times when we just can't say no. Whether it is our own inner imperative, or answering a call from the outside, we know: this is it.

I am reminded of an essay by the nature writer Annie Dillard, in her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk. In the first essay, *Living Like Weasels*, Annie describes the instinctual action of a weasel attacking its prey. The small mammal bites its prey at the neck and remains hooked to the prey at the jugular. The weasel does not let go, no matter what.

Annie tells a story: once, she says, "a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won." Annie continues, "I would like to have seen that eagle from the air a few weeks or months before he was shot: was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fur pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel; with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones?" (p. 12)

A rather violent image, truly, but it tells us of an example from nature, this weasel, a creature who responds entirely from instinct and who lives with singular necessity. He doesn't ask questions, he just bites. Annie extrapolates to our human lives and muses, "I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles." (p 16)

Well! I first heard this passage read by the dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Houston, Texas, in 1988. It totally blew my mind. I immediately made an appointment to talk with him. I felt like I needed to answer a call, an imperative, to grab hold and not to let go. I felt that I was called to live like a weasel. Ultimately it led me into the ordination process. True story.

So, three examples: first Moses, who was called to a singular necessity, to answer God's call to deliver God's people from slavery. Second, Annie Dillard's example from nature, of the singular necessity in the instinctual life of a weasel. Third, my response to all of the above, knowing that I too had a singular necessity, and it was calling me to wake up, and hang on.

I suspect Jesus understood his calling in the same way. He was called by God at his baptism, and he fulfilled his calling to the end. In the Gospel of John, he speaks with surety and foreknowledge, but in all the Gospels he knows where his life is leading, and he embraces this path as his one necessity. His followers likewise understood their calling and what following Jesus would mean to their lives.

All good Bible stories speak to us directly. We read these stories, not necessarily as history, but as a meaningful message for our own lives. Is God calling us to action? Does God know us so well that God can demand our response? Does God call us as individuals, or as a group? Does God help us discern what is important for our lives, and the lives of our families, of our faith community, of our country, of the world?

Yes. And if we are listening, it can indeed change our lives, our path, forever. We too can live like weasels, clamped on to God's call, and be lifted up by God into a vast ever changing landscape, following God's call into eternity.

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Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk, "Living Like Weasels, pp. 11-16. Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. New York, 1982.