

This morning I want to encourage you to think about your purpose. One of the books that has been most influential on my life is *Man's Search for Meaning* by Austrian Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. By the time Frankl entered the concentration camps at 37 years old, he had already spent much of his adult life as a psychiatrist and neurologist.

In his time as a prisoner, he began to notice something. The prisoners that tended to survive the concentration camp were those that had some greater purpose they were striving towards: seeing a loved one again or finishing a half-written book. Of course, any of his fellow prisoners could die at any time, but he noticed, once a person lost a sense of purpose, the end was most likely near.

I think that's a testament to the power of purpose. Human beings can withstand an enormous amount of adversity if it's for a purpose. For an important strategic goal, military personnel will suffer and endure all kinds of hardship. Over the years, I've spoken with numerous veterans. They often “come alive” when they talk about their service. It was the time in their life in which they were entirely devoted to a cause.

For the simple purpose of standing on top of the highest mountains in the world, climbers will risk their lives and risk losing their toes and fingers to frostbite. We can endure and even gladly accept an amazing amount of adversity as long as there's a purpose. In fact, Viktor Frankl quoted the philosopher Nietzsche, who said, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

It seems God ordered human life in such a way that purpose is an important component to a thriving, fulfilling, and joyful life. In our reading today, God revealed to Moses his life's purpose. If you are not familiar with the story of Moses, he was a Hebrew. The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt.

Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, had given in order to drown all male, Hebrew babies in the Nile at birth. Moses should have died shortly after he was born. However, in defiance of Pharaoh, Moses's mother hid him for three months. When the baby could no longer be hidden, she sent him down the Nile in a basket.

As fate would have it, one of Pharaoh's own daughters found the basket and had Moses plucked from the river. He grew up in the royal palace and actually became a member of Pharaoh's court. One day, after observing an Egyptian brutally beating a Hebrew slave, Moses struck the Egyptian and killed him. When word started to get out that Moses killed an Egyptian, he fled for his life. That's why our reading began with Moses tending flocks in the wilderness. He was hiding from Pharaoh.

But God found him. Now, there's nothing wrong with being a shepherd, but that was not the ultimate purpose for Moses. God heard the cries of the Hebrew people. It was God's desire they be freed from slavery. God had a plan for them and who could have been more qualified to go to Egypt and lead them to freedom?

Moses cared about the Hebrew people, because he was one of them. He, also, grew up among the Egyptians. He knew them and he was familiar with their ways. Unlike most Hebrews, he grew up knowing what it's like to be free. For the task of freeing the Hebrew people, there may have been no one alive more qualified than Moses. For anyone seeking purpose, this could be the place to start looking. You might find your purpose at the intersection of where your unique experience and abilities meet the needs of the world.

We just passed the anniversary of the March on Washington in which Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. Given his situation and his unique gifts and abilities, he found his purpose as a leader in a social movement. That was his purpose.

Your purpose and my purpose might look very different. It's personal. These are two questions I ask myself and I encourage others to do the same. What do my particular abilities and experiences prepare me to offer the world? The second question is, where do those abilities and experiences intersect with the needs in my family, my church, my neighborhood, and beyond?

Before you answer those questions, there's another aspect to the story. Our God-given purpose might not be what we expect or what we think we want. God told Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." To which Moses replied, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He resisted.

When confronted with our purpose, it might be daunting. The response of Moses is a common response: Who am I? When Jeremiah was called for the purpose of being a prophet, he replied, "But I am only a boy." In other words, who am I that I should lead the

life of a prophet? The Nominations Committee, here at the church, sometimes hears that same response.

When Moses balked in the face of his task, God responded, “I will be with you.” That was the indication that although Moses may have been uniquely positioned to free the Hebrews, it was not all about him. God will be with him. Even Moses needed to learn that he was capable of more than he imagined, because once his purpose was aligned with God’s purpose, anything was possible. It’s that old quip: “If God leads you to it, God will get you through it.”

Your purpose or my purpose might be difficult and daunting. It could be far-reaching and sophisticated. But it can also be simple and very personal. I mentioned, in the concentration camp, the desire just to see a loved one again was enough of a purpose to keep someone alive.

Your purpose could be to simply encourage people through letters or email. Your purpose could be to just get your child through high school. Sometimes that’s a big enough goal. Your purpose could be dog or cat rescue. I’ve heard more than one person say, “I didn’t rescue my dog. My dog rescued me...My pet gave me a reason to get out of bed in the morning.” Following a school shooting, students in Parkland, Florida started a movement to end gun violence. They turned tragedy into a purpose.

Recently, I saw a video of someone suggesting we shouldn’t ask others what they do. That’s usually the question we ask when we try to get to know someone. He said, “Ask who they serve.” If you ask a mechanic what they do, they might say, “I fix cars.” Here’s a better answer: “I ensure people get to their destination safely.” That’s a mechanic with a purpose.

Having a purpose can get us through so much. I think it’s the key to joy and happiness. And it’s not just about individuals. It’s a beautiful thing when church members have a shared sense of purpose. When a community has a goal toward which it’s working, it’s a lot easier to weather all the obstacles and challenges and setbacks it faces. Frankly, it makes it a lot easier put up with one another. That’s why having a vision, a purpose, for the community is so important. Mark Twain said, “The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why.”

A few years ago, actor Jeff Goldblum appeared on “The Late Show” with Stephen Colbert. Colbert asked him how he stays inspired. Goldblum began with a mundane

response. He mentioned something about playing music. Then, he paused and said, "Actually, I keep coming back to this quote from George Bernard Shaw."

Then, entirely from memory, he recited this quote saying: *This is the true joy in life...being used for a purpose considered by myself as a mighty one. The being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish, little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making me happy. I'm of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community. And while I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch that I hold up for the moment. I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.*

Shaw said it well: This is the true joy in life... being used for a purpose. God called Moses for a purpose. Go through the entire Bible. God positioned Queen Esther for a purpose. God empowered Mary Magdeline for a purpose. God engaged the Apostle Paul for purpose. Jesus triumphed over death itself, because he knew his purpose.

Of all the things God provides for us, it might be that the most important is purpose.