**Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible: The Failure of Human Imagination**

**Exodus 3:9-14, 4:1**

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For those who were not here last week, or who couldn’t believe it when you heard, we really are doing a sermon series on big “buts” of the Bible. Please read carefully, though. There is only one “T” in the “but” that we are talking about.

Do any of you remember Schoolhouse Rock? It was a children’s, animated, educational TV program that aired on Saturday mornings in the 1970’s and 80’s. It has gone through a couple of iterations since then. They had a song called “Conjunction Junction.”

Conjunction Junction, what’s your function

Hooking up words and phrases and clauses.

Conjunction junction, how’s that function?

I got three favorite cars that get most of my job done

Conjunction junction, what’s their function

I got and, but and or, they’ll get you pretty far

It continues to describe what these itty-bitty words do. These little words, these conjunctions, actually hold together some pretty weighty and powerful ideas. So, we must not underestimate these little words, especially when reading the Bible. And, of course, the conjunction of choice for this sermon series is “but.”

Do you know how many times “but” appears in the Bible? Yeah, I really don’t either. It’s not something we can be definitive about. First, it would depend upon the translation of the Bible. Then, do you include words with similar intentions like “however” or “rather” or “though?” One would think that with the power of Google and other Internet search engines, that it would be a simple query to find all the “buts” in the Bible. But, for the life of me, not one revealed all the “buts.”

So I went to my shelf and dusted off my Strong’s Concordance, a book that lists all the words in the Bible alphabetically and references where to find them. Even then “but” did not show up with the other alphabetized words. I had to go to the back of the book to an addendum, and there I found pages of “buts.” I did not take the time to count every single reference. Rather I tallied the multiple columns on each page and multiplied it by the number of pages, and by so doing came to the conclusion that there are over 4,000 “buts” in the Bible.

We began the series last week with what I consider the Bible’s biggest “but.” Jesus is talking with his disciples and asks them who people say he is. After a good time of reflecting on what people were saying, Jesus took the conversation to the next level with that mightiest of words, “but.”

But who do you say that I am? We talked about how “but” is often a game changer. When Jesus’ asks the question, “But who do you say that I am?” It is no longer a theoretical or philosophical exercise without personal consequence. To fully answer Jesus’ question requires us to either ignore him, or get busy following him.

I am convinced, as we talked last week, that even though we call ourselves Christian, we are slow to truly answer that question. We have seen what it required of persons who like Peter confessed “You are the Christ” – people like Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonheoffer, and Martin Luther King, Jr. We are not sure we want that kind of radical discipleship for ourselves.

On the lips of Jesus “but” is a real game changer and a call to action. It moves us to have to reevaluate and recalculate our lives because Jesus calls us to community that is almost antithetical to the ways of the world. Perhaps we will take a closer look at that and other times that Jesus grabs our attention with “but” statements.

However, Jesus isn’t the only one who makes use of this little conjunction. Moses had a good time with this word, as do others in the Bible who have the auspicious opportunity to be confronted by God. And while when Jesus uses “but” it is often a game changer, when Moses and others use it, it is often to keep the game from changing. When humans use “but” in the face of God, it is usually followed by some very good reasons why it is not possible to do what God is asking.

You know Moses’ story. The Hebrew people found themselves welcomed in Egypt because Joseph saved the Egyptians from starvation during a famine, and so the Pharaoh was happy to shelter all of Joseph’s clan, the Hebrews. Over four hundred years passed and we hear that a new king came to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph. History had been forgotten, and this new king was threatened by the number of Hebrew people that lived among them. He was afraid they could rise up, so he made life hard on them, even to the point of demanding that all male Hebrew babies be killed. Moses was born and his mother was able to hide him. But soon she could hide him no longer and put him in a basket, floated him down the Nile where he was found by the Pharaoh’s daughter who raised him in the palace.

Now fast forward a bit. Moses had to run for his life because he killed an Egyptian soldier who was beating a Hebrew laborer. He ended up helping the daughters of the priest of Midian, Jethro, who eventually married off one of his daughters to Moses. One day he was tending the flocks of Jethro when God confronted him by taking the form of a burning bush that was not consumed by the flame. I am assuming that is a story we all know. If not, ask one of our children in Sunday Cool Disciples, because the story of Moses is what they are learning about in this season’s rotation.

God said, “I have heard the cry and observed the misery of my people in Egypt. So I want you to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let them go.” It seems perfectly logical. I mean if God came to you today and said, “Would you please go to Kim Jong-un and tell him don’t do this nuclear stuff. Destroy your missiles and make peace.” Would you respond, “Say no more. I’m right on it, God”? Probably not. And neither did Moses. Rather, Moses responds, “**But**, God, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’ ”

What we have here, is the failure of the human imagination.

Moses simply could not conceive how God could free a whole nation of people, especially by using Moses himself to traipse into Egypt, sidle up to Pharaoh and say, “Hey buddy, let’em go.”

You know Moses’ arguments after he says “but”, because we use them ourselves. Who am I? I’m a nobody. I’m just a shepherd out here in the boonies working for my father-in-law. Besides, have you forgotten? I’m a wanted man back there in Egypt for killing that soldier. And walking around telling people that “God told me to tell you” does not exactly sound sane. Nobody’s going to believe me.

Oh Moses! You dimwitted, narrow-minded, unimaginative reprobate. Okay, God didn’t say that, but I can imagine how frustrated God must get sometimes when we refuse to put away our fear and trust in the goodness that God wants for us.

Think about it. Have you ever felt a yearn, an urging that maybe you should be doing something? Giving something? Do you ever feel guilty about not acting on, or participating more in your faith? Those little inklings may be God’s Spirit speaking to your spirit to let go and trust God. For Moses, it manifested itself in a burning bush. And too often it scares us and we begin to stutter, but, but, but. We come up with several good reasons to ignore the calling on our lives because we don’t have the imagination how God can use us.

Not only do we have a failure of imagination in our faith as individuals, but also as the institutional church. When tradition is more important than reaching new people with the love of God in Jesus, we fail in our imagination. When churches say that God couldn’t possibly use women as pastoral leaders, we fail in our imagination. When churches say that God couldn’t possibly use gay, lesbian, transgendered people in the leadership of the church and should not ordain them, we fail in our imagination.

Whenever we immediately say, we can’t do that, we fail in our human imagination. When we block the Spirit of God by immediately responding, “But,” we fail in our human imagination.

You’ve heard the old story dozens of times throughout the years and I think it is very telling. The very religious man caught in a flood and is on his rooftop – a canoe paddles by and they say get in the canoe, we will take you to dry land. The man says, “No, God will save me.” Then a powerboat comes by, and the same conversation occurs. The flood is getting higher. Finally a helicopter hovers over and they try to convince the man to grab the rope to be saved, and again he says that God will save him. Then the flood washes him away. When he arrived in heaven he complained to God that he put his trust in him and yet God didn’t save him. You know the punch line. God said, “What did you want me to do? I sent you a canoe, a boat and a helicopter.”

How is God working in our lives, and yet we don’t have the imagination to see it? Let me raise one possibility one more time, and then you will never hear me mention it again. We have this wonderful location. When the church moved here over 150 years ago, it was considered the boonies. Now we find ourselves in the midst of what’s happening. The city is moving toward greater downtown density, encouraging high rises. The unintended gift that has been granted us through the generations is this tremendous asset that is above us, which is nothing but air right now. But it could be the means to fuel this ministry from this corner for another hundred years or more by providing the kind of space we need and the revenue to help fund the ministry.

Not to seriously consider how we use this asset for greater ministry is a failure of our human imagination. It is one big “But” in the face of God. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying a high rise is the answer, but not to seriously consider it or invest enough energy and resources to faithfully discern the possibilities I think would be a missed God given opportunity. And that is as far as I will take it.

Not only does saying “But” to God denote failing in our human imagination, it is also saying to God, “I don’t trust you.” And even worse, “God, I know you are the creator of the universe and all, but I think I know better than you do.” Is that really where we want to find ourselves?

It is true, not every thought we have, not every urge in our gut is God inspired. What is needed is the space and time to discern. Let’s help God help us. Let’s not dismiss God with our “buts,” **but** open our hearts and mind to the leading of God’s spirit.

I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.