

Somebody Has To Believe!

From the series: Heroes in Clay: Moses

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Exodus 3:11

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

Two weeks ago, the last time that I was with you in this setting, I told you that I was leaving for Boston for Brandeis University, and for the think tank on Congregational Affiliation, which is funded by the Lilly Foundation and is centered at the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis outside of Boston. I told you just briefly what I intended to say on Sunday night in the worship that I was to lead - the Protestant worship service for that mixed group of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. You were so very kind. You even applauded, and I left here feeling I hardly needed the airplane in order to fly there. It was a great encouragement to me and so many of you since I have returned have asked me about it that I feel I must take just a moment to let you know it was one of those experiences for which, having looked forward to it with great anticipation, all my expectations were met. So seldom that happens in life - you look forward to something and then it happens and we say, "Is that all there is?"

But this was really a wonderful experience, full of stimulation, full of very wonderful people. There were about 50 of us and then a few presenters. The subject was Congregational Affiliation and, as I said a few weeks ago, the reason the study is being made is that many people in our culture are not affiliating with churches and synagogues, and so the purpose was to find out why, and to try to find ways in which to encourage people to return to the churches and to the synagogues.

My Reformation Day message to them was a word in due season to the right crowd. I didn't know who was going to be there and, had I known, I would have been scared to death, I think. There were a few denominational executives, many professors in sociological research in religion, and then there were a few garden-variety practitioners like myself. But when I said to them at the conclusion of the message that we have met the enemy and it is us - it could not have been spoken more poignantly to a better crowd. My suggestion was that the big problem is all of our divisions, all of our structures and institutions that keep us separated and

apart from one another. And so my message was a word of judgment at the purpose of the whole think tank. What a way to honor an invitation!

It would have helped a little bit if I had had a little more leisure time. I knew that the schedule was tight, but the plane was late and then the taxicab got lost. I was to preach at 7:30 p.m. and I walked in at 7:30. It is a wonderful way to get ready for divine worship, biting your fingernails all the way. But it went quite well, actually.

It was quite well received in spite of the fact that I was suggesting that maybe we were dealing with the symptoms rather than getting down to the root cause. But I did what I promised to do. I suggested that we undo the divisions between Catholics and Protestants, between the East and the West, between Islam and Judaism, and between Christianity and Judaism. Just a mild proposal.

(Laughter) An impossible possibility. But it is a possibility, and after being there and associating with priests and pastors and rabbis, I believe it could happen if we would all simply get out of the way. There is really not any good reason why we could not all be children of God - together, except for the vested interest in established institutional structures. I believed that before I went, I said it while I was there, and coming away from the experience I am convinced that it is true.

The problem is to find somebody who will believe it. To find somebody who would be outrageous enough to propose it and actively pursue it. That's what this world desperately needs. Somebody to believe. Somebody to believe that things do not have to be forever as they have been. Somebody to believe that God has dreams and surprises that have not yet entered the human mind to conceive of. Someone to believe.

Today, and for a couple of weeks, I want to look at some biblical characters. Heroes. Heroes in Clay. God knows we need heroes. We love heroes, and we have in our past heroic men and women of faith. But, if we are honest, the heroes are always heroes in clay, for the point that I want to make is not that these were gigantic figures, extraordinary people who are able to do great things for God. My point is simply this: that God is able to do extraordinary things through very ordinary people if only God can find a man or a woman to believe. God knows *somebody* has to believe.

Moses is our first Hero in Clay. The story is so very familiar. The situation is the oppression of Egypt. Male children of the Israelites are being killed at birth because of the population growth and the threat that these Israelites posed to the Pharaoh. This mighty civilization of the ancient world was now in slavery, and their children were being done away with. Moses was miraculously rescued, nursed by his own mother, after having been rescued by a daughter of Pharaoh and raised in the splendor and nurture of that marvelous Egyptian civilization, coming to a point of responsibility in a leadership role. But seeing his own people, the Hebrew slaves, abused, he rises up in indignation one day and kills an Egyptian. And, in that moment of wrath, righteous though it may have been, he

recognizes that his whole life now is changed. He flees Egypt. He finds the wilderness. He tends sheep for a man named Jethro, whose daughter he marries. And for years and decades he broods on the course of his life and that moment that changed everything. He must certainly have gone through times when he said to himself, "Egypt must have it right and the gods of Egypt that seal and bless that whole system must be Gods indeed. The slaves are but animals, worth nothing. My righteous rising up and committing of murder was an irrational moment without foundation in truth." But was it? As he brooded on it, at other times must he not have been gripped by the conviction that, "No, that can not be right. Slaves are slaves, but slaves are human. Slaves are people. Slaves have feelings. Slaves must not be used as a commodity, as so much chattel. As he brooded in the isolation of the desolate wilderness, I wonder if he churned inwardly. All of his education. All of his culture. Now in that isolated wilderness with hours and days and years to think.

Chaim Potok, the Jewish novelist, is the one who gave me a window into the psyche of Moses, how he must have struggled with that watershed moment of his life - that rash action and what it was that caused him to rise up and kill a man. It may have been the culmination of those years of internal struggle that caused him one day to be confronted with a phenomenon - a bush that burned but was not consumed. I think so often in our Sunday School theology we picture a literal bush and a literal flame, and an audible voice and all of that, but I think Potok may be right that, suddenly, all of that that was churning within him came to a point in which God manifested God's self. There was that inward conviction that the gods of Egypt were not gods, that there must be another God, some other source of truth that was pressuring him and pushing him.

Then he hears a voice that comes in a vision, full of mystery and awe, in which he is encountered by this wholly other One who says, "Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground. I have heard the cry of my people. You are right, Moses. Treating human beings as a commodity is wrong. Slavery is wrong. I am the God of people who would have them free and accorded dignity and respect. You are right, Moses, and I call you to go and to lead them out of their servitude, and I will be with you." Moses says, "Who? Me? Who are you?" "I am that I am" comes the answer. Now that translation is not a good translation. The Hebrew translated by our verb "to be" doesn't exist in the Hebrew language. There is no verb for "being." That's too static. Rather, those who know the language have a nuance which suggests that what God was saying was not, "This is my name," but "I am the God who will be there for you. I will be truly there. I will be present for you. I will be whatever I need to be in any situation wherever you go."

So in Moses we have the coming together of a deeply held truth about what God would have for human persons, and this sense - this word, "Go. I'll go with you."

Too often I think we set biblical heroes high on a pedestal as though they were some other breed than the rest of us. We assume that it must have been crystal

clear. Moses, just go and do it. But it wasn't so crystal clear as indicated by the subsequent conversation with God. If we had time to go on to the fourth chapter we would find Moses saying, "Can't we reconsider? Who am I, after all? Not me, please. I can't even speak eloquently," and finally, "Could you send somebody else?" This is God's hero - wanting to pass the buck. This is the man of deep conviction - full of self-doubt, shrinking from the moment of encounter after the moment of epiphany.

A Hero in Clay - just like the rest of us. Scared to death. Shrinking from the execution of that which had gripped him in the depths of his being. "But, Moses, somebody has to believe." "Yes, but not me - please could you send somebody else?" Isn't that so like our human experience? Can't you identify with Moses at a time like that? Rather than marching forth in the strength of God on the basis of this revelation, this epiphany, this bush that burned and was not consumed, Moses slinks away and tries to get out of it. If only it could have been nailed down with certainty. Isn't that the way we wish we could live?

I met with a couple this summer. Their life seemed as though it might be coming to a crossroad. They gave me a call, hoping that this man of God could help them determine which way the arrow of God's will was pointing. (Ah hah.) I just smiled at them. They said, "Well how can we know?" I said, "You can't know."

How do you know the will of God? You don't know the will of God. Oh, sometimes some few of us have some kind of mystical experience, some kind of clarity. But for the most part, we live making decisions one after another, so wishing we really knew, but we really don't know. That's what it means to be human. We live in the ambiguity of our historical existence where we always have to decide with partial knowledge and limited understanding. And so the decisions, ultimately, are decisions made on faith. Could you send somebody else? Now the deep conviction and the promise of God's presence are neutralized by fear. That's our great enemy. We are afraid. What if we crawl out on a limb and somebody cuts it off? "What if I cross the border into Egypt and they still have papers for my arrest?" "What if I go to the people with this message that you purportedly are giving me and they reject me? What if I try and fail?" Are we not time and again stunted by fear? Fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of making a fool of ourselves? We don't expose our deepest yearnings and desires and hopes and dreams. We don't dare tell anybody because we are afraid they will laugh. And after all, how do we really know?

Last week I was in New York at our *Perspectives* board meeting, and someone suggested that we need to do an issue on angels. One of the members of the board said, "I'm running into people all over the place who are having all sorts of experiences with angels." And someone else said, "I'm not." He was told, "You are probably not giving them permission to tell you."

Do you remember the stories of near death experiences that exploded a few years ago? Suddenly, one was reported and then another, and then a whole rash of

them because most of us don't dare tell those deepest intuitions, longings and dreams of our life. We are too afraid. Afraid that we will be laughed at, scorned or rejected. Moses said, "I think probably you would probably be there for me, and I do think that it would be right that slaves be set free, but could you send somebody else?"

About two or three years ago after one of my *Perspectives* meeting I reported to you that we had met with Edwin Mulder, the Executive Secretary of the Reformed Church, and suggested to him that perhaps, rather than frantically trying to rescue the Reformed Church in America, we ought to begin a process of orderly dismantling. That was not an easy word for Ed to hear at that time. We met with him again Monday because we have an annual executive review of our work, and the mood was different. Ed suggested that it may be a few years away but, all things being equal, a dismantling may be in store. I heard after he left he had just announced his retirement in June of 1994. So I came home and wrote him a letter and I congratulated him on his decision and affirmed him for his work, and then said to him that I had noticed on election night that John Chancellor, the retired elder statesman, seemed to have so much fun. He was so relaxed. Retirement has a way of doing that to you, you know. When we are in the trenches and have the harnesses on, we are so serious and have such a sense of responsibility. Everything seems so heavy. Our creative juices can get all dried up. But there was old Chancellor having a ball. And I said to Ed, "Now that you have announced, let me suggest that the last eighteen months be the best you've ever had. Why don't you propose some outrageous thing? Why don't you get the heads of the denominations together, and suggest to all the giants that we dismantle and start over? Why don't you have a ball in this last eighteen months? Have fun! Be outrageous!" Well, I will be interested to see how he responds to that. (Laughter) But, that is where I began.

I am convinced that energy and resources and worry is poured into religious institutions and structures in order to sustain yesterday's answer, in order to perpetuate anachronistic structures that do not bring together God's people, but actually keep us all separate in our respective boxes. The thing that needs to happen at that think tank is not that we find ways to make our respective institutions prosper, but that we find a way to transcend our respective institutions in order that we might find a new energy and a new way to carry us into the third millennium. *Somebody has got to believe!* Somebody's got to say, "Enough of business as usual. Enough of all of this fearful clinging to that which once was legitimate and necessary."

One of the issues that we will have in *Perspectives* next year has to do with language, with God's language. We have talked about that here. I picked up a book on my way home - a book of excellent essays. One author asked whether or not Christianity will be able to sustain itself in the future. She suggested that it may well not make it for, if it doesn't change, it will be to society too unrelated and irrelevant to where life is really moving."

Some of you tease me as though I just like to rock the boat. Well, I do. Some of you think that this is just a game. And, it sort of is, but I'll tell you - deep down there is something else operating. It is because I believe in God. It is because I believe the Gospel. It is because I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world and that we have in our traditions the richest resources that the world so desperately needs, that I don't want to see them just piddled away, written off as though they are irrelevant and unable to meet the pressing needs of our day in a world that is tearing itself apart - fractured and fragmented, hostile and warring. We have so much to share with the world in terms of the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God that would make people one - if only we could let go and trust God.

Dear friends, somebody has to believe. Maybe it's you. You say, "But how can I know?" And I say, "You can't." And you say, "On what basis do I plunge?" And I say, "Trust God. Trust God. Trust - God."