

Faith: The Final Frontier ~ To Seek Out New Life and New Worlds

Let's back up a couple of weeks to that burning bush: "Go down, Moses, 'way down in Egypt land. Tell ol' Pharaoh, "Let My People Go!"

Moses resisted; but he went. And he told ol' Pharaoh, "Thus says the God of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: 'Let my people go!'"

And Pharaoh (played by Yul Brynner) said, "Moses, preachers shouldn't meddle in politics. And besides, you don't understand what would happen to the economy of Egypt if we were to lose this source of cheap labor" (out-sourcing hadn't yet replaced slavery.) And he increased the workload on the Israelites.

But God was with them, and soon Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and across the Red Sea—down to Mt. Sinai. There they received the Ten Commandments, and got their marching orders, and after a long and tear-stained trek they reached the borders of the Promised Land.

Moses sent twelve spies to spy out the land. After 40 days they returned and submitted a majority report and a minority report. The minority report, submitted by Caleb and Joshua, reflected a conviction that come what may God's will must be done, and a certainty that God's will can be done if only we don't lose hope (which James Glass defines as 'a passion for the possible').

By contrast the majority report was pragmatic. The prudence it counseled was but a thin mask for the moral cowardice of those who submitted it. In part it read:

<p>(NUMBERS 13:32B-14:4 NRSV) <i>"The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³There are giants in the land; and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."</i></p> <p><i>^{14:1}Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron;</i></p>	<p><i>the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."</i></p>
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"We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers; and so we seemed to them."

87 years ago in his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." It's always fear that does a people in. That's why the Bible always insists that the opposite of love is not hate; it's fear: "*Perfect love casts out fear*" (I JOHN 4:18 NRSV). Love urges us to seek truth in the realities of life. But while love seeks truth, fear seeks safety.

Actually, fear distorts the truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world (which would be difficult to do) but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to deal with them. "We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers."

Fear seeks safety, and safety lies in failure. You see, what we most fear is not the evil in the world, or in ourselves, but the *GOOD* in us; because to realize it would be just too demanding.

"My son, your sins are forgiven." That's comforting. "Rise, take up your bed and walk." That's intimidating.

It is easier to be guilty than to be responsible. Majorities therefore tend to be pragmatic, and most people adopt a strategy of protective failure: "You can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor."

And if we can feel that fate (i.e., "giants in the land"—or Republicans or Democrats) made us a failure, we don't feel so bad about being one.

And if you can feel that the Calebs and the Joshuas of this world are pushing you around, then you can resist them in good conscience: [I'm grateful to the late Dr. James D. Glass for the inspiration behind these last few paragraphs.]

"Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt." God was enraged that the people had so little trust and faith, and said to Moses: "Get out of the way! I'm going to wipe them off the face of the earth!"

But Moses interceded, and God repented and let them live; but with this caveat: "None but Caleb and Joshua will see the Promised Land. I will raise up another generation from them—a generation that *will* trust me, and *will* do my will." And the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, while a new generation grew into maturity and was ready to possess the Promised Land.

We've been talking about generations. Most of the social and political and spiritual ills in America (maybe in all of Western culture) can be traced in some way to the differences in values and expectations between the generations. And I believe healing can happen when people of the various generations begin to communicate and understand one another.

Somewhere in human history—I'm guessing around the time of Cain and Able—there emerged an obsession with uniformity—everybody being the same — more specifically, everybody being like me or us. Everyone has to agree—with me—about everything.

Well... how's that been working out for you? ...with your spouse? ...or your kids? ...or your boss?

So here comes Jim Robinson, and I tend to tick off everybody, because I have a passion for balance. I believe *everybody has a part of the truth*, but *nobody has all of the truth*.

Said another way: I agree with former General Minister and President, Richard Hamm: *I believe absolute truth exists; but I don't believe you or I or any other*

person or group of persons is capable of grasping truth absolutely.

Conservatives emphasize individual responsibility; liberals emphasize social responsibility (East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet!) I passionately believe it's about a balance of both. None of us is exempt from personal or social or political or spiritual responsibility for each other's welfare.

But I'm not naïve enough to believe everybody will agree with me. Humans never have agreed on everything; never will.

And that's OK. In fact, I'm not sure it's good for everyone to agree about everything. Life and faith almost always are enriched by the diversity we bring to the table; and if we're willing to take the time and the effort to listen to and understand one another we almost always discover significantly more agreement than disagreement. I believe understanding precedes and trumps agreement.

And when we truly begin to listen to one another we discover common ground that often we didn't know existed. I believe common ground exists in the midst of widely diverse and partisan—and too often belligerent—voices that dominate the American culture today. That common ground is the "Promised Land" at whose borders stands the North American church of the 21st century; and into which God calls us to "boldly go where no one has gone before."

And I believe Disciples are uniquely suited to take the first steps into this Promised Land, "where no one has gone before."

But even at the borders of the Promised Land, even after miracles and the manna from heaven and the water from the rock—even after the thunder and lightning of God's presence at Sinai, the comforts of life in exile seemed better to some of the Israelites than the risks and hardships—and the freedom—that lay ahead—"where no one had gone before".

And after sixty years of decline in the North American Church, in spite of the ineffectiveness of previous ways of being church, there still will be times (for some it will be all the time, for all it will be some of the time) when that ineffective past seems better than the challenges and risks of the present wilderness.

How will we respond: "Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt?"

Or, will we respond: "Let us go up and possess the land; for surely we are able to overcome it."