

The Adventure That Chooses Us

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I choose how to live a life I didn't choose.

—from *Daily Afflictions*, by Andrew Boyd

Ancient Witness: Exodus 3:1-2, 9-13, 4:1, 10-13

When I was younger I remember reading J. R. R. Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings*. And several years ago, a dear friend shared a passage from the second book of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, with me.

The three hobbits, Frodo, Sam and Gollum, are traveling through the Morgul Valley, a territory ruled by the evil power Sauron. Frodo has the impossible task of carrying the Ring, which possesses evil power, to the Cracks of Doom and casting it into the fire to unmake it. In order to reach the Cracks of Doom they must pass through Cirith Ungol, a fortress in the Morgul Valley, without being detected. It is a dangerous and exhausting journey, and this conversation takes place when they have stopped to rest:

'I don't like anything here at all,' said Frodo, 'step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.'

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it would call a good end . . . I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?' (p. 696)

That's the way it goes sometimes: "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?"

We don't go out seeking these harrowing adventures. They seek us. The adventures choose us. In the stories that really matter, people seem to have just landed in them. We have lots of chances of turning back, and the question becomes, "Shall I continue on this hazardous journey or not?" For each of us, it's a different thing, but we have that moment when we say, "I didn't sign up for this."

This was the question facing Moses.

A reluctant leader – that is what Moses was. Because of genetics, because of his history, because of his particular gifts, Moses felt called to a particular sacred task. Likewise, the Sacred calls each individual to particular tasks. Each of us has been called, is being called, to fulfill certain gifts that we have to be used in behalf of the kingdom of God. And each of us, just as Moses demonstrated, has a certain amount of reluctance to respond to this call from the deep stillness, a call to a contentment and happiness not based upon possessions, success, approval or anything measurable. If we are honest, the call of justice, compassion, solidarity and peace will always produce some inner conflict, some internal tension. Otherwise, we would not be human beings. All of the great religious leaders struggled with self-doubt and loss of nerve. Even Jesus, in his agony at Gethsemane, threw himself on the ground and prayed, “Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me . . . (Matthew 26:39)

Moses got a message from God that was as clear to him as a burning bush – to go to the Pharaoh, deliver a message of solidarity and peace, and to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, out of oppression. (In the story, Moses speaks with God as if God were a person or an object or a being, which God is not, it seems to me. All description is metaphorical.)

This is one thing that I like about Moses. He was not afraid to disagree, argue and challenge this inner voice. He was afraid of a lot of other things, but he was no passive recipient of God’s messages. He was in true and honest dialogue with the divine. Moses is not afraid to raise objection after objection.

One of the objections that Moses has was, “I have never been eloquent . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” In order to lead Israel, Moses knew that he would have to be a public speaker. He would have to proclaim and convince. And Moses knew well the hazards of preaching.

And so he said, “Whoa! Just a minute. *Who am I?* I’m not smooth. Who am I to confront Pharaoh? He holds all the cards, all the power, all the armies.”

Moses said, “I’m not really competent. I don’t have the rhetorical skill.” (I’ve imagined that God responded, “Look, Moses, you’re doing pretty good with me!”)

But God’s response is consistent. God says, ‘I will be with you.’ Then Moses asks instead of “Who am I,” “Who are *you*? What shall I say to people when they ask, ‘What is your God’s name?’” This is a question that many of us ask.

Many of us feel that in order to be a messenger of the word of God, a messenger of compassion and justice, that we should be able to answer all of everybody’s questions. What is God’s real name? What does God look like? Etc. Harold Kushner once said that one of the holiest phrases in our language is “I don’t know.” *We don’t have to be perfect to be a messenger of the word of God*, a messenger of trust, unity, wholeness, peace and boundless joy—to be a good parent, to be a person of faith, to be a citizen. We don’t have to be able to answer all the questions. God responds, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” or “I can’t give you all the answers, but I will be present.” Get over it, Moses.

Moses said, “Suppose they do not believe me?” He continued to raise his objections: What about my speech impediment? God said, “I will be with your mouth.” Again, the best that God

promises is God's continual presence. This does not satisfy Moses, who said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."

Now, God has been very patient up until now. And our text says something very interesting: "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses." The picture we have here is that God is getting *fed up* with Moses' excuses.

But then, we all know the rest of the story. We know it because in spite of his fears, his feelings of inadequacy and his inner reservations, Moses did not turn back.

And so it is that God works through us all – our reluctance and our strengths – to be part of that one great story that never ends.

When I became the senior pastor of Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, almost 25 years ago, I had to make some decisions. I knew that that congregation had taken a stand for equal treatment for gay and lesbian persons, a stand that was directly opposed to the denomination's laws and rules. And so I promised to bind myself to that congregation and the risky policies it had made.

But we had little idea that we would have found ourselves in the center of a national controversy and that I would have been the only Presbyterian minister ever put on trial for officiating same-sex marriages and ordaining gay and lesbian elders and deacons.

Like Frodo and Sam, I asked myself, "What sort of tale have we fallen into?" (Actually, I may have used a different word than "tale" at one time.) We certainly didn't go out looking for that kind of adventure; it chose us. If we were going to maintain our integrity, be authentic, be true to ourselves, then our path was laid before us.

Considering who we were—our values, our convictions; and considering what was happening around us—the forces and the powers that were at work—we didn't have much of a choice. We just landed in the middle of this story.

Now, the traditional word for this is "call." It is not something we can seek; it seeks us. One of my favorite call stories is the call of Elisha. It comes upon him like a sneak attack. There he was – unsuspecting – plowing in the fields. Along comes Elijah, and without any warning whatsoever, throws his mantle over him.

The mantle signified Elijah's position as a prophet, a very dangerous thing to be at that time. You all remember how Elijah was hunted down by Ahab and Jezebel and the worshippers of Ba'al. So in this act of throwing his cloak around Elisha, he was naming him as his successor. Poor Elisha never had a chance. The adventure chose him. And it was up to him to respond to this call.

This reminds me of a quote by Jean-Paul Sartre:

Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.

There is so much of our lives that we don't choose. So much seems to be forced upon us. We seem to just fall into adventures and stories. We seem to be called reluctantly along certain

paths. And the choice we have is whether we embrace it or turn back. The question is how do I live this life – this calling – I did not choose? This is true not just for us as individuals, but collectively, as a congregation.

And now here we are—a small progressive faith community in Central Ohio in a time when the liberal church is fading away. It is also a time when we are witnessing an unprecedented gap between the rich and poor, and an erosion of the once vibrant middle class. We live in time when 95% of the economic gains have gone to a fraction of 1% of the population for the past 15 years. A time when most are seeing wages and income decrease. A time of the ascendancy of corporate wealth and power, an avoidance of taxes and contributing to the commonwealth of the nation. Lately, some Representative in the U.S. House have been threatening not to pay the nation's debt unless the President agrees to cuts in things like Medicaid, SNAP, Medicare and Social Security. We live at a time when we are unsustainably spending over 55% of the federal discretionary budget on the military while our schools and infrastructure crumble and decay. We live at a time when this nation gladly uses and depends upon the sweat and labor of migrants, yet at the same time threatens to deport them and tear apart their families. We live in a time where anti-democratic forces discredit elections and promote minority rule through gerrymandering, purging voter rolls and voter suppression. When the Proud Boys brandish AR-15s to threaten and intimidate harmless drag shows. When we witness police violence against black and brown people on a regular basis.

And so, given our faith, given our values and convictions, and given our circumstances, given the unavoidable reality in which we live—we might be asking ourselves, “What sort of tale have we fallen into?” Our integrity might be telling us to follow a path that has been laid out before us.

Today we face what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the evil triplets of “racism, poverty and militarism,” as we find this nation grabbed by the neck by White supremacy, plutocracy and a war economy. What sort of adventure has chosen us?

In the middle of my Cincinnati adventure I visited one of our oldest members, Charlotte Staab, who was 101 years old. She has been in for pneumonia and heart problems. Like so many times, I go to visit to give comfort and encouragement and I end up receiving far more than I give.

She asked how my children were doing, as she always did. She asked how I was, and I confessed I was a little stressed-out at times over these charges and over the tension in the congregation over the path laid before it.

And she looked at me with these dancing eyes and a smile that was not superficial in anyway and said, “Well, just trust in the Lord.” And these old sounding, traditional words were so refreshing to me – trust in the Lord!

And so, no matter what kind of story we've fallen into - Let us trust in the Sacred Reality, the ever-present preciousness of life.

No matter what kind of harrowing adventure chooses us. Trust in the Holy One, the Holy Vision.

Like Frodo we might feel like we're in the Morgul Valley, and we might feel like saying,

I don't like anything here at all... step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.

No matter what path is laid before us, we can stay on that path and trust in the vast, oceanic Loving Presence.

Despite our fears, our reluctance, our feelings of inadequacies,
we can embrace our calling, maintain our integrity, stay on that path
and trust in the Mystery.