

“The Prayer of Moses”

Numbers 14:1-24

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I like to collect obituaries- I’m forever cutting out the death notices of persons whose lives I find interesting and even STRANGE, perhaps because as I find myself on the cusp of my eighth decade of life, I wonder what my OWN obituary will one day read. Talking about people who are different, Poppa Neutrino certainly qualified as that. He died a couple of years ago at the age of 77. You probably never heard of him but he was important enough to warrant a rather large obituary in *The Wall St. Journal*. His name was NOT really Poppa Neutrino but William David Pearlman. He never wrote a book, acted in a movie, or managed a Fortune 500 company. What he DID do was lead “a life nearly as free as the subatomic particle for which he named himself.” To hear Neutrino tell it, “The idea of freedom became paramount to me. Remaining free to move, free to plan or not plan, free to have an adventure, free to explore an idea or an intuition, free to make my own choices and determine my future drove my life from that day forward.”

Hence, in his pursuit of freedom, there was very little logic to his life. In the early 1950’s, he dropped out of school and joined the army; he hung out with the beatniks in San Francisco and worked at various times as a pastor, a sign painter, and a correspondent in the Vietnam War. He frequently slept in the streets and avoided paying rent like the plague. He was married four times and led his family on journeys across the U.S. and through Mexico. To raise funds, they learned to play on instruments from pawn shops and performed as The Flying Neutrinos. His GREATEST achievement, however, was to make a raft entirely out of garbage and sail it across the Atlantic along with his wife, two companions, and three dogs- only the second person to successfully raft the Atlantic and the first to do it on a pile of garbage. People couldn’t figure out if this free spirit was fearless or just plain nuts.

Our story this morning is about God’s people- the Israelites, who after years of servitude and oppression experience THEIR first taste of real freedom. Unlike Poppa Neutrino however, it isn’t long before they decide they just can’t handle it. For hundreds of years, they languished as slaves in a foreign land and throughout their enslavement, they never stopped crying out to God to deliver them and make them a free people once again. But then God HEARD their cries and, out of both love and pity, raised up Moses to guide them out of the land of bondage and into a NEW land flowing with milk and honey. Their deliverance from Egypt—the Exodus—would become “the defining event” of the Old Testament.

After a period of wilderness wandering in which they were led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, they now find themselves on the border of Canaan. Moses sends a delegation of spies to see what is in the land. Eventually they return carrying large bunches of fruit, proof that it is just as God said. However, they ALSO discovered cities that are large and well-fortified, and these cities are inhabited by people so strong and so large that they themselves seemed like grasshoppers in comparison. Realizing that the path of freedom would not be an easy one, the Israelites begin to feel sorry for themselves and even regret having left Egypt in the FIRST PLACE. Wearied by their desert existence and fearful of the great challenge before them, they’re not convinced that the risk is worth it and that any attempt to conquer the land will

only end in futility, even DEATH. They accuse Moses of getting them into this mess in the first place and reject his leadership (which is actually a rejection of GOD HIMSELF). When Caleb and Joshua remind them that the land is INDEED bountiful and that the Lord has said he will bring them into it and give it to them, their anger is such that they want to stone them to death.

Finally, God's patience is exhausted. He tells Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than them." God has become SO disgusted with his people that he resolves to abandon them. He will revoke his covenant with Abraham and establish a NEW one with MOSES as the beneficiary. MOSES would then become the father of a great nation and through HIS loins the savior of the world would emerge.

Moses responds with this marvelous prayer of intercession. He says that if he follows through with his threat and destroys the people as he is promising, then Israel's great enemy--the Egyptians--will accuse God of being impotent, of not being able to do as he originally promised his people. Moses pleads on their behalf, appealing to God's patience and love to pardon his people and forgive their sin. In spite of their unfaithfulness, if God were to let the Israelites enter the Promised Land, her enemies would then know just how powerful he TRULY is.

The Bible calls Moses "the meekest man in the world." When the Israelites made the golden calf in direct defiance to God's will, it was Moses who prayed for God to forgive them their sin, and if not, then to punish HIM instead. Moses was willing to take upon HIMSELF the sins of his own people if by doing so it would help avert God's anger. And then HERE, when the people show their ULTIMATE ingratitude by demanding to return to the slavery and oppression God had first delivered them from, Moses rejects the offer to make HIM the NEW Father of Israel and pleads instead for God to show mercy to them- AGAIN! What this demonstrates is how the most important component of ANY prayer is that it must issue from a heart full of true humility, that when we come before God, we must know that there can be no place for ego or pretense.

Of course, the most STARTLING question is why ANYONE, after having experienced real freedom, would want to return to the slavery they had so long despised. What were they so afraid of that they would gladly re-submit themselves to the same bondage they had once cried out for deliverance from? The reality was that THEIR FEAR WAS GREATER THAN THEIR FAITH. The threat of the unknown was SO daunting that it overwhelmed everything else. These same people had witnessed God defeat the mighty armies of Pharaoh; they had watched God lead them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; and they had found themselves sustained by a steady diet of manna from the moment they left Egypt. Now they are poised to enter that which God had promised their forefathers- a land flowing with milk and honey. If God could do such things as THESE, then why could they not trust this same God to drive out the inhabitants as God SAID he would do? Instead, they would rather die in Egypt than face an unknown and threatening future in Canaan, for at least in Egypt, they had three square meals and a roof over their heads.

In reading the autobiographies of great Christians both past and present, I notice how often they compared their life to that of a pilgrimage. They think of themselves as being on some kind of a journey, something I can resonate with MYSELF for I like to think of my OWN life in such terms. Like those Israelites of old, I found myself amidst my OWN wilderness

wanderings, often unsure as to where I was heading or where I'd ultimately end up. When I was a young man, neither I nor any of my friends would have ever dreamed that I would become a minister, and that I would serve such varied congregations in California and Pennsylvania and New Jersey, in New York and Iowa and Indiana, and finally back again in Pennsylvania. And the journey is not over YET. How Rose and I navigate retirement, serving these two small congregations in the process, and how long our health will continue to hold out, only God knows.

Perhaps the most COMPELLING account of one person's life featured as a great journey was John Bunyan's religious allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which, outside the Bible, has become the largest selling book of all time. It is about one man's search for redemption which for Bunyan was representative of an adventure many if not MOST individuals find themselves on. Presented as a dream, the author details the various trials and escapades experienced by one man named Christian who upon reading a book (which is presumably the Bible), is suddenly confronted by the terrible weight of his own sin. He leaves his home, the City of Destruction (a city that is symbolic of this world) to seek out the Celestial City (which is representative of heaven) where he learns that THERE ALONE will he find release from his guilt. Encountering all sorts of roadblocks and fearsome creatures along the way, it isn't until he at last arrives at his long-sought destination and stands before the cross of Christ that his burden falls from his shoulders and he is finally freed from its terrible weight.

Friends, I learned a long time ago that as the people of God who find themselves on a very similar journey, the only way we can SUCCESSFULLY negotiate it is to be guided by FAITH and not by sight. That is because there are no dependable roadmaps to specify where we will all end up in life- that not even the BIBLE can do that for us. I have a real problem with preachers and Bible teachers who like to point out specific scriptures and say that if you simply follow this rule, if you merely adhere to these standards, you TOO will chart a friendly course and find yourself well on your way home- it's all that easy and effortless. They'll tell you that all the great answers to life can be found somewhere within its pages, that you only need to know where to look and then do what it tells you.

If only life WERE that simple, to take no responsibility for our lives other than to consult a book in which we would find all the answers we would ever need, or to have someone else tell us what to do instead of thinking or struggling for those answers OURSELVES. For this reason, people will consult an astrologer or check their daily horoscope; this is why people in prison will gladly spend their days incarcerated, being told where they must go or what they must do so long as they have the security of three square meals a day and are relieved of having to think for themselves or take responsibility for their actions.

I suspect that that was the REAL reason the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt and become slaves again. At least there would be some security and the future would seem far less risky or threatening. Although life might be hard, at least it wouldn't be FEARFUL. All they had to do is "obey and follow orders," the same way so many Germans did under Hitler or the Russians under Stalin or the Chinese under Chairman Mao. They didn't have to ask QUESTIONS- only DO. It's the same reason many Christians flock to churches run by strong, controlling ministers. They'll tell them just how to live and just what to do- and they DO it, and this gives them the feeling that they're following the Christian path and that it's really not that hard. It seems people tend to be drawn towards strong, authoritarian figures whether in a pulpit

or behind the desk in the Oval Office of the White House who will gladly make all the decisions FOR them. As a result, life becomes easier and much less complicated for it involves less thinking for themselves, fewer moral struggles to contend with, and less responsibility to assume overall.

But we know that life is NEVER quite so easy or programmatic as all that, that it's messy and confusing and filled with more QUESTIONS than answers. However, rather than a clear detailed map, what if God were to give us a COMPASS instead. Steven Covey, the author of the best-seller *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, SUGGESTS as much:

*We are more in need of a vision or destination and a compass and less in need of a road map. We often don't know what the terrain ahead will be like or what we will need to go through it...But an INNER COMPASS will always give us direction.*

Not sure of where to go or what to do, we look at the compass and the needle points to the commandment that we shall love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, and we shall love our neighbor as we love ourselves. That then would be the direction we are to go. At the NEXT crossroad, we are confronted anew with yet ANOTHER decision, but when we look down at our trusty compass, we find that the answer lies in loving God with all our being and loving our neighbor as we love our self. With that kind of guidance based on love, on GOD'S love, we will surely find our way to our life's goal and destination.

Many years ago, I wrote in my Bible a Latin inscription that comes from the early Church Father St. Augustine that has since served as my credo in life. It reads "Dilige et quod vis fac" and translated it means "Love God and do what you will." And what he meant by that was this--if you love God, if you make him the center of your life and fill your heart with gratitude for all he has done for you, then you will never have to bother with a lot of rules and regulations ever again. You won't have to concern yourself with a lot of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" "for then your HEART will serve as your guide and it will become your BEST guide! You see, God's love actually serves as a kind of compass, and with a compass, we possess a freedom that is not possessed with a map. When you've got nothing except a map, you're either on the right route or you're lost, but with a COMPASS, it allows you to be inventive and independent as you negotiate life's terrain. No matter where you are, that compass point will always direct you back onto the right path. MORE importantly, you find yourselves trusting GOD HIMSELF instead of some blind or arbitrary principle or rule that often has NOTHING to do with God or God's righteousness.

The problem with those Israelites was that they wanted a road map, they wanted the security that comes with clear instructions--one that outlined all the twists and turns and obstacles before them--but God gave them a COMPASS INSTEAD, he gave them HIMSELF to follow. He essentially said to them, "Just follow me. Stay close. Be attentive to my voice. I will be with you every step of the way. I will help you negotiate every turn and every obstacle. I will never leave your side. And when you trip and stumble or find yourself wandering too far afield, I will lift you up and bring you back. Only believe."

After Moses died, it was then up to Joshua to lead God's people. He reminded them of God's faithfulness and of his promise to give them the land he had sworn to their forefathers--only, they were to be COURAGEOUS AND NOT FEAR. Sure, the way would be no LESS

daunting and battles would STILL have to be won, but with God to guide the way and give them strength, they could be assured of eventually reaching their goal.

Well it is no different today. The Bible instructs us that “perfect love casts out all fear” and what that means is that love cannot abide in the same breast as dread and anxiety and distress. It means that love is so fierce and so strong, it will defeat and “cast out” from our hearts any and all of the panic and worry and concerns that rob us of our joy and deplete us of our faith. Well, each of us is outfitted with that SAME love—with GOD’S love--this very morning. Therefore, like Moses, let us remain humble before our God. May we be courageous and not surrender to our fears. Sure, the journey can be risky for it is up to each of us to find the way—that is our freedom, a freedom which the Israelites THEMSELVES rejected. But with our compass in hand and the promise of his presence and provision, we TOO will arrive at our destination, we TOO will reach that goal God has appointed for US- HIMSELF! Let us pray...

*Gracious God, help us to be a people of humility and faith and love. Keep us from any fear that would rob us of your joy and peace- whether it be a fear of shrinking finances or of ill health or perhaps of growing old and facing death. As your children who are loved with an everlasting love, you have made us free- free to walk through this life with courage and confidence, sure in the knowledge that you lead us and empower us and will never forsake us. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen and amen.*