

The Adventure That Chooses Us

Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregational Church
Tucson, Arizona
May 23, 2010

Readings: 1 Kings 19:19-21 Exodus 3:1-15; 4:1-5, 10-17

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 travelling 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?"

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, God had called Moses to a particular task. Likewise, God 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 God's call. If we are honest, God's call 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, "My Father, 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 and to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. At its root, this was a call to be a messenger of the word of God, the same call that is issued to each of us, to be a messenger of the word of God. Yet for Moses, this entailed some specific challenges, challenges of which Moses was excruciatingly aware.

This is one thing that I like about Moses. He was not afraid to disagree, argue and challenge God. 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 with God.

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 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*, to be a good parent, to be a person of faith. 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?" So God teaches Moses a magic trick where he turns his staff into a snake and then back into his staff again. God said that God will provide signs, signs which people can interpret the presence of God. What kind of sign would be relevant to us today? We often interpret events as signs that God is active in our world today. But signs do not guarantee belief. In fact, they may even harden one in unbelief the way Pharaoh's heart was hardened when Moses performed signs for him.

Moses 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 and God said, ‘What of your brother, Aaron?’ ” 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 pastor of Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, 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, 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. You’re “it” Elisha! No tag-backs.

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?

And now here we are—a progressive, Christian church in Tucson, Arizona—in the epicenter of a very large drama that has national attention.

We are first-hand witnesses to the unfolding immigration crisis in this country. We didn't ask to be at ground zero of one of the most controversial issues of our nation, but we are.

And 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.

As individuals—new members and long-time members, young and old—and as a congregation, we can ask, “What path do we find ourselves on? What is our calling, our adventure that we did not choose, but which 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 Lord.

No matter what kind of harrowing adventure chooses us. Trust in the Lord.

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 Lord.

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 Lord.