

MOSES AND THE RED SEA

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday morning we saw Moses perform an incredible feat. He prevailed upon the King of Egypt to let his people go. It was an incredible feat for the simple reason that the principal contestants in this struggle were so unevenly matched. Moses - the leader of a relatively small group of slaves. Pharaoh - the ruler of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth at that time. And Moses did this remarkable thing not by force of arms or by any tricks of magic, but by wit, will and patience, and his patience was in reality nothing but the willingness to trust in God and take his time. Just by way of reflecting momentarily upon last Sunday's sermon, let me just say this. These, I feel, are the weapons that win all of the major battles of life. Not guns, not bombs, but rather wit, will and patience - all of these undergirded with a faith that cannot be shattered by defeat.

There is one more dramatic episode in this part of Moses' life, namely the crossing of the Red Sea. This is what we're going to be thinking about this morning, and then after today we shall leave Moses and bring this sermon series to an end. I suppose it could go on indefinitely for Moses is such a tremendous personality, and his influence hovers over a great many pages of the Bible. Michelangelo was right when he made Moses massive.

HOW THEY GOT THERE

The first question facing us this morning is simply this: how did the Israelites arrive at the shore of the Red Sea in the first place. I think if all of us had maps in our hands we would perhaps wonder about this more than we do because we would see that the natural thing for them to have done in making their exit from Egypt would have been to travel directly to the north rather than to the east. You see they had been living in Goshen, a district of Egypt that was located in the delta of the Nile near its mouth and if they had gone straight to the north, they would have easily reached the Mediterranean Sea. Then they could have taken the coastal route, traveling through the land belonging to the Philistines, and thence on into Canaan. But instead, you'll recall, they turned eastward and went toward the Red Sea and the desert, certainly the more difficult and more dangerous way, and a much longer way too.

We pause and wonder why they did this. They did it, at least this is their interpretation of it and I commend it to you as an interpretation of the motions and moves that you and I make as we go through life, they did it because they believed that God was sending them that way. Never, for one minute, did they pretend that they went that way simply by chance or luck or fate. They went that way because God directed them to go that way. And here, I feel, they had something of a grasp on one of the deepest of all religious insights, that there is at the heart of all life something that gives it direction and purpose, and that you and I in our own lives move not in a hit or miss way, here, there and everywhere, the way falling leaves are blown hither and yon by the wind, but we move according to a plan and purpose.

Well, you may be saying to yourself, this raises another question. This makes it all the more mysterious because if God directed them, why didn't he send them by the shorter and more direct route, instead of by the most circuitous one? The writer who put the various stories together as we now have them in the book of Exodus answers that question.

He says that God directed them toward the Red Sea in order to keep them out of war. They would have had to pass through the land belonging to the Philistines if they had taken the coastal route, and the Philistines, you'll recall, were a war like people and they were not at all likely to allow a strange people to go through their country without opposition. Undoubtedly, the Israelites would have been attacked. Very likely they would have been discouraged and gone back to Egypt.

This, I'm sure, is the real explanation. But as I read the Bible, it is for me not only a record of past history, but it is also a revelation of God's will. I should like to think that God may be saying something like this to us in this passage: I directed them toward the Red Sea in order to keep them out of war because I know that war can ruin a people. The hardships of the desert may destroy their bodies, but the cruelties of war can destroy their souls. He may be saying to us something like this, quite over and above the original meaning of the passage: the wilderness is better than war. Listen to the passage as it is recorded in Exodus. "And it came to pass, when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the Philistines, although that was near. But God lead the people round by way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea"

It reminded me, and perhaps it will remind you too, of all the roundabout ways that we sometimes travel and which at the time seem to be so unreasonable. You and I often resent those detours and delays along the way. I remember reading the autobiography of Harry Emerson Fosdick a few years ago. In that book, he tells us how during the early years of his ministry he lost close to one whole year in his ministry because of illness. He secretly resented it. This detour seemed to work against all of his plans and purposes. But he went on to tell us in that book that he would never have known what prayer really meant, and therefore he would never have been able to write that wonderful book, the Meaning of Prayer, which millions of people have read, if he had not had a major nervous breakdown in the early years of his ministry. In something of a similar fashion, you and I may be led through detours, and we may face delays along life's way. Sometimes they work out to our best advantage too, as they did in the case of Fosdick. All of this reminds me of something that my mother use to say to me when I was growing up. Originally this saying had a popular, romantic setting, but I'm asking you to think of it in a much more serious way. This is the saying: the longest way round is the shortest way home. Sometimes when you're forced into what seems to you to be a detour, an unreasonable delay, remember that and say to yourself that the longest way round may in this case be the shortest way home. The way through the wilderness of hardship may be the shortest way to life's finest and richest blessings.

WHAT THEY DID WHEN THEY GOT THERE

We move on now to the second question facing us in this

portion of the narrative: what did the Israelitess do when they got to the shores of the Red Sea? We find that they balked. They began to wish they hadn't come. We can't linger too long over the things that go on in our minds at this point, as we read the story and see ourselves as in a mirror. But here they were on the threshold of freedom. Forty years they had been slaves. Moses had managed to rouse them out of the rut of accustomed and accepted servitude and his inspiring and dynamic leadership had brought them this far. They

were on the brink of freedom as they camped on the shores of the Red Sea. But Pharaoh with all of his chariots was moving up behind them. He was a vacillating king, you'll remember we saw this last Sunday. He changed his mind as often as he made it up and once he had let them go he regretted his decision and pursued them furiously. He was now at their heels and the Red Sea was in front of them. It was not a great sea, but it looked great to them. They had no ships; they had no equipment for crossing this body of water. They were panic stricken. They began to grumble about it and said to Moses: "Because there were no graves in Egypt has thou taken us away to die in the wilderness".

And how Moses's heart must have bled when they said that. The people that he had run great risks for, the people to whom he had given so much of himself, the people for whom he had won this extraordinary opportunity and who were on the brink of freedom, now turned on him and upbraided him and asked him if there weren't enough graves in Egypt that he must take them out into the wilderness to die. The pettiness and the grumblings of the people - more than one leader has had to face these. But this, I think, is the time when a leader shows his real mettle. Moses was steady. Perhaps you remember what he said. It has been quoted over and over again and I have told it to you in sermons before and have asked you to write it down in your minds, to put it in the place where you keep the things that are most important. This is what Moses said: "Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord". No - he didn't scold them; he didn't pity himself or allow himself to become bitter. This is where Moses reached great heights. He simply stood firm, steady in his faith and confidence and patience in God. And in so doing he reassured those frightened children.

Here again we have a picture of human nature. So many times we get just to the shores of the Red Sea. We gather ourselves together and get up and get out of a situation which has been enslaving us or paralyzing us in one way or another. We exert this enormous energy and we accomplish this much - we get to the shores of the Red Sea, and then we get frightened. Before us - freedom and a new life. But uncertainty and danger. Behind us, slavery and security, and a relatively safe way of life and so often we end up turning back and taking the safe and secure way.

True as it is in our own personal life, even more serious it is in our civic life. For example, the relationship between the white man and the colored man has haunted this country for two hundred years. Some of us thought it was settled a hundred years ago when Lincoln signed the Proclamation of Emancipation. But it was not. A great step forward was taken to be sure, but twenty years or so later things got worse than they had been before and the white man and the black man, especially in parts of the country were completely separated, politically as well as personally. Finally after generation of acceptance of that situation, the Supreme Court made its historic decision that the public schools of the country shall be open to all children regardless of color. At that point we stood at the shore of the Red Sea, on the threshold of the solution to our problem. Now, as we stand there, pursuing us from behind are the fears of the South and the impatience of the North, the riots and scenes and violence that have already taken place and others that will probably take place in the future, and what we are likely to say is "Lord, we wish we hadn't come. Why didn't we let it stay just the way it was? It wasn't right, but it was better than this. At least we knew where

we were and now we do not know where we're going. Let's go back".

So many other examples of this come to mind that I dare not launch into them. Think, without my enlarging upon it, of the situation in regard to world peace. We finally have taken the risk and joined the United Nations, and to that extent sacrificed our sovereignty. We are at the shore of the Red Sea. Now the Russians behind us and the threat of hydrogen bombs above us, surrounded on all sides by fears and fancies, facing an unknown future, the danger is that the people are going to say, "We wish we hadn't come. Let's go back".

In one of his most critical days in office, if not perhaps the most critical one of all, Abraham Lincoln wrote this line: "Whatever he designs, He will do for me. 'Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord' is my text just now". It's really something is it not the way the words of one man come down through the centuries and rise up from the page to meet another great man in his hour of need. This ought to be the text for every person as they stand on the shore of the Red Sea: "Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord".

THE STORY ENDS ON THE OTHER SIDE

Going back to Moses and the Israelites, the important thing of course is that they managed to get across to the other side. You ask, how did it happen. What took place enabling them to cross over to the other side. They got across it in a miraculous way and they were not afraid to acknowledge that, and they never dreamed of thinking that they got across in any other way. During the night a strong east wind blew the sea back to lay bare the land. In the morning the Israelites went across safely, but by the time the Egyptians arrived with their heavy chariots, the wind had died down and the waters had come back and as they tried to go across the same way, they were drowned. Naturally, as the story was told down through the generations that followed, the miraculous element in it was heightened, so that in one story Moses stood over the sea with a rod and ordered the waters to divide themselves and in another, from another tradition, the waters stood like two solid walls between which the Israelites proudly marched.

The important thing is that the Israelites got across and the Egyptians did not. And they managed to get across not by any cleverness of their own. They did it because of things happening over which they had no control. These things happen in life. We need to remember this. On one side is the situation that is intolerable and interminable, and nothing can change it. Then something happens - the tide turns, help comes, a friend arrives, a decision is made, the skies break and the incredible thing happens and like the Israelites you find yourself walking on dry land in the midst of the sea. We can't always explain. Things happening over which we have no control. We may say to ourselves "Well I couldn't have done this alone. God had a hand in this. Apparently he has a purpose for me and he's fulfilling it."

And isn't it true that when we have this attitude of mind, this attitude of faith and complete trust, we're given strength to move forward. And so we come to the closing moments of this sermon. We approach the end of this series of sermons dealing with Moses, and in closing I ask you to think on these things. The wilderness may

may be ahead for some of you just as it was ahead of the Israelites when they got across the Red Sea. The future may hold many problems for you that have to be solved. There may be perils facing you and dangers that have to be met and overcome, but always in the wilderness is the memory of what took place at the shores of the Red Sea. This will keep you going. Keep in your mind, somewhere before your eyes if possible, those two great lines that shine like lights in this story and they will help you when you need them the most:

"Fear not and stand still and see the salvation of the Lord"

"And the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the Sea"

Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life,
Where, inspite of all you can do,
There is no way out, there is no way back, there
is no other way but through?
Then look to the Lord with a faith serene,
Will the night of your fears has gone,
He will send the wind, he will heap the floods,
When he says to your soul "Go on".

LET US PRAY:

O God, who dost often lead us by way of the wilderness toward uncertain difficulties and futures of which we cannot be sure, help us to trust always in thy guiding purpose and in the plan that rules our lives and, when we are fearful and inclined to go back, give us the courage to stand still and then to go forward knowing that the strength that we need is the strength that we will be given. Amen