

"ON THE WAY TO ELIM"

INTRODUCTION

If you have any poetry left in you after the terror and the great tragedy played out in Munich this past week, you may feel a lift in these words from the book of Exodus concerning some ancient marchers of Israel on the dusty roads of a desert long ago: "And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees".

DEVELOPMENT

Everybody gets tired sometimes. Sometimes that tiredness is in the body, sometimes in the mind, sometimes deeper in the heart. It was said of Julia Ward Howe that once when it seemed the weight of the world was on her, she slumped down in a chair and said that she was tired - tired way down into the future. We all have moments when we feel like that. And we need to remember that we're not really ourselves at such times, that we're apt to say and do things that we wouldn't normally do. Tiredness acts like a drug; it dulls the mind, weakens the will, makes for irritability and depression, brings about a loss of temper and morale and perspective.

into the blood stream

Sometimes that sort of tiredness affects a whole generation. It gets into the stuff of the minds, spreads like an epidemic, becomes the prevailing mood of an age. We see it illustrated in these people coming out from Egypt long ago. They were not themselves. "The people murmured against Moses". And yet it was Moses who had led them out of slavery, set their feet on the road to freedom. It was a great moment in their history, but right from the beginning of that venture they were in difficulty and were not behaving well.

Incident after incident in the record reveals how the long years of slavery in Egypt had corroded them and taken all the fight out of them. They got tired quickly and easily became disheartened. Every time they confronted a problem they got panicky, grumbled about their leaders, and wanted to turn back. When faced with danger from Pharaoh's pursuing army, they grumbled that Moses had brought them out into the wilderness to die. When the wilderness yielded little in the way of food, they grumbled. When they came to Marah and stooped down to drink its brackish waters, they spat it back and grumbled. There was always that undertone of irritability, that murmuring about a lost and idealized past and wanting to go back to it - sooner be slaves in Egypt they said, than dead in the wilderness.

Then right in the midst of all that bickering and confusion and sweaty marching in the hot sun comes this verse, like an oasis in the desert, which it was: "And they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water, and three score and ten palm trees; and they encamped there by the waters". Picture the scene. Twelve wells of waters. Seventy palm trees. Cool shade, green grass, rest. Somehow it renews your faith in the goodness and mercy of God.

MUCH IN COMMON

I think we have certain things in common with those ancient marchers. There are parallels between that ancient pilgrimage and our own. We, too, are part of a moving, marching and irritable generation. There's a kind of weariness in the atmosphere. Our daily speech is filled with words like strain, stress, tension. The pressures of life take their toll on us.

Dr. Paul Dudley White once observed that our civilization is a fatiguing one. It's too tense, too full of noise and hurry, and the most common complaint of our society is, "I'm tired". So speaks the physician.

There are several kinds of tiredness, several branches of weariness and you can trace them on that ancient road travelled by the Israelites just as clearly as on our own.

TIREDFNESS OF EXHAUSTION

First, there is the tiredness of exhaustion. It's familiar to us, but by no means easy to explain. What is tiredness? Fatigue? Exhaustion? When you're tired, what is it that gets tired? The dictionary suggests it "the depletion of energy, the exhaustion of strength". We've all experienced this tiredness of exhaustion and we don't need a dictionary or a doctor to tell us when it comes. We drive our muscles or our minds. We overtax our energies and after awhile a kind of uncomfortable disintegration sets in, a defense mechanism that nature itself automatically sets up against further effort until the resources of energy can be replenished.

On one of his programs, Bob Hope, reported his activities for the day. He said that his heart beat 103,369 times and his blood travelled 168 miles. He breathed 23,040 times, and inhaled 438 cubic feet of air. He ate three and one-fourth pounds of food and drank two pounds of liquid. He perspired one and a half pints. He generated 450 tons of energy. He spoke 4,800 words, moved 750 major muscles, exercised seven million brain cells. And then he said, "Boy, am I tired!"

I think we understand our text pretty well, for we're familiar with this kind of physical tiredness. That long march across the desert had been going on for many days - the sand, the sun, the sweat. They were tired, physically exhausted. Then they came to Elim where there were wells of water and palm trees. And that is one of the cures for tiredness - rest, relaxation, restoration: palm trees and grass and water. There is an affinity between water and earth and our bodies. It's a good thing to have a lot of water, a boat on it, a fishing rod. Tolstoy used to plow the fields, they said, in his bare feet so that he could draw strength from the earth.

I'm sure that some of our modern tensions brought about by life in these canyons of concrete would diminish if we could find our way to Elim; that is, to make use of nature's restorative powers.....for there is a real connection between green pastures, still waters, and a restored and renewed soul.

TIREDFNESS OF FRUSTRATION

However, tiredness is not physical exhaustion alone; you can fix that with sleep, with rest and relaxation. There are also some intense emotional factors involved in fatigue. And in the murmurings of those ancient marchers of Israel, you can clearly trace another kind of tiredness - not exhaustion - but the tiredness of frustration. It's the kind of weariness that comes from prolonged waiting, delayed hope, disappointment. This road to freedom was longer than they thought it would be. This dusty desert was proving to be no Utopia and the promised land seemed far off. With high hopes they had started on this journey. They had pictured the thrill of it - getting out of Egypt, free people, marching and singing their way to the promised land. They had thought one good battle would do it, one daring leap of faith and then all their troubles would be over and they would be there.

They hadn't figured on the monotony of it.....the day after dreary day of keeping at it with the sun beating down on them and the desert stretching out endlessly in front of them.

The trouble with life, as Dorothy Sayers once put it, is that it's everlastingly daily. Everlastingly daily! After a while this kind of tiredness can get into your bones - the weariness of keeping at it, the monotony of that long road, or the frustration of the delayed hope. The truth begins to sink in that there are no permanent victories. You win a battle today, and you're in another one tomorrow, and you have it to do all over again. The road to our private promised lands is a little longer and tougher than we figured it would be!

This kind of tiredness cannot be cured by rest or relaxation. This is precisely what we must not do: rest, relax, give up, quit "fighting the good fight". This is what our adversaries are counting on; they expect to wear us down, tire us out. This kind of tiredness calls for another kind of response: for a renewal of moral courage, the kind of courage of which the NT is full, that expects frustration yet keeps on patiently believing and doing battle, that resists all temptation to feel sorry for ourselves, or give up the battle because the road is rough.

In 1891, Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Sir Winston Churchill, wrote to his wife that in all probability more than two-thirds of his life was over. He said that he would not spend the remainder of his years beating his head against a stone wall. There had been nothing but abuse and misunderstanding. He was tired of it all and would not continue in public life any longer. We can understand that feeling. We've heard men in public life, church officials and Sunday School teachers say something similar....that they're tired of it all, too. And chances are in one way or another we've felt the same way, but somehow we're glad that Moses didn't talk that way back there in the desert, or that Winston Churchill didn't feel that way back in the 1940's when England was in trouble. It looked like it might go down and I'm sure many were overtaxed and overtired. But remember his words and what effect they had: "We shall fight them on the beaches....we shall right them in the streets....we will never surrender". Courage - that's what it's all about. That's what God is after. So you say you're tired and want to give up the fight, that we can't count on you to stay in the battle a little longer.

I came across that delightful story of the two frogs again this Summer in my reading - the two frogs that fell into a can of cream. Remember how they thrashed around, trying their best to hop out of it and couldn't make it. Finally one frog got tired and quit. "What's the use of it" he said, and with that he flipped his flippers in one last sigh of despair and sank to the bottom. The other frog, however, was made of sterner stuff. "I may not make it" he said. "I, too, may go down, but at least I'll go down kicking". And so he kept kicking and churned the cream into butter and with his feet on a chunk of it, he leaped out. There is something in that foolish, but delightful story all of us could use. Pessimism makes no sense. It really doesn't matter what the fight is - whether it is a fight for health, for faith, for character, for business, for a decent world, for a stronger church in this site - pessimism is the one thing that makes no sense, against which we must guard ourselves, and rule it out of the game. Pessimists accomplish very little in any area of life.

^{PAUL'S}
You heard ~~Isaiah's~~ words earlier in the service. Talking about the long march of the exiles, he said it would be hard going: "Even the youths shall faint and be weary and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; walk and not faint". And Paul, writing centuries later, said: "Let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not".

TIREDFNESS OF DEPRESSION Let's move on to the most important word. Have you ever stopped to consider just what it is that makes people the most tired, what it is that takes the very heart right out of them? It isn't hard work, or monotony, or disappointment or delayed hope. It's doubt. It's fear. It's the thing that the Bible would call unbelief. ~~Let's call this one the tiredness of depression.~~

I think people can stand anything as long as they believe that what they're

doing makes sense, that it has meaning, that they'll eventually arrive. They may get tired in it, but never of it. They can bounce back and stay with it as long as they know that it has purpose. But when faith in God goes, hope goes with it, because life is left without the one thing out of which hope springs - the divine purposefulness of life.

You can trace it there in the murmurings of these marchers of old - unbelief, and the growing fear that perhaps they had been deceived, that the road on the desert was a dead-end road, that there was no Promised Land, nor any God to make one. Maybe Moses was a fool, God a delusion, the whole venture a mirage. This unbelief took the heart out of them, depleted them.

Maybe there's something in this that spills over into our own tired generation. In one of George Moore's novels, he tells of Irish peasants back in the period of the great depression who were put to work by the government of Ireland building roads. For a time the men worked well; glad to be at work again, they swung their picks and sang their Irish songs. But little by little they discovered that these roads they were building led nowhere, ran out in dreary bogs and stopped. And as the truth gradually dawned on them that the roads were pointless, that they had been put to work solely to provide employment and an excuse for feeding them, the men grew listless, leaned on their shovels and stopped singing. For men to work well and to sing well, there must be an end in sight - in view.

There is a connection between atheism and pessimism, between our time's secularism and its cynicism, between its loss of faith in divine purpose and its mood of despair about the future. We seem to have lost a sense of mission and the sense of divine leadership along the road of life. We're not sure that we're going anywhere and even our progress has become pointless.

As I see it, I think we'll be Christian a little while longer, and string along with the believers, the unsophisticated, the not-so-brilliant people who in spite of appearances believe that there is a purpose behind it all and that we're not alone on the road of life. Yes, I think we'll stay with the believers a little longer. Pessimism is the one thing that makes no sense, and that's what Christ means to us, or should mean to us. I'd be a pessimist, too, were it not for Him. He never did lose faith in people, nor faith in the future, and he keeps me believing in people, in the future, in myself, in the future of this Christian outpost at the heart of urban America. I think many of us are fighting hard for what faith we have, and maybe it's true that a lot of people get fooled because they believe too much, but far more people get fooled because they believe too little.

Julia Ward Howe said she was tired way down into the future. Plain exhaustion. We all experience such moments, but we must not let them have the day. She didn't. A believer, she believed in God, felt his presence, believed his spirit was stirring in another impulse to freedom in her time and energized by her faith in divine purpose, she wrote a song that has ever since set the blood tingling and the spirit marching forward, her memorable, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored...." We find no tiredness there - no fear, no doubt, no despair, no pessimism - just the bugle and the battle, and a prayer for ears to hear the sounding, for hearts to respond. As we prepare for a new season in our lives, let us move with song stirring in our hearts, believing that divine purpose runs through life, and the battle we fight for truth, for righteousness, for goodness is adding up to something significant.

PRAYER

Divine Father, help us to hear above all voices, the voice that calls us to battle for abiding values and lasting truth. We are not here to

dream or drift. We are not here to have peace of mind. We have work to do in days ahead, and loads to life. Help us in this hour to wait on Thee that our strength, our physical, mental and spiritual vigor may be renewed with the sense of thy living presence on the road. Amen