

"THE NOWHERE PLACE"

INTRODUCTION Once upon a time a group of people found themselves in the nowhere place. The story is found in the 14th chapter of the Book of Exodus. It is the stirring story of the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt. Moses had let them out into the desert to become a new people. The enthusiasm in which they had been caught up when they left so bravely and quickly evaporated under the physical hardships of the trip. They were city dwellers. After all, they had forgotten how to be nomads. They did not like having to learn again, and they complained bitterly about everything. The faint-hearted among them were ready to quit.

Moses led them out by a strange route. It was not the way that many thought they ought to be going, but a route that took them to the Red Sea. This too was cause for complaint. The logical route, surely, would have been through the land of the Philistines, but no, Moses had let them in a direction that would be a disaster. They came up out of the wilderness and encamped by the sea.

Bad news followed quickly. The Egyptians, repenting that they had allowed their former slaves to leave, armed for war, and Pharaoh sent his army to bring the Israelites back. So there they were. Behind them was the inevitable destruction at the hands of the Egyptians army and before them was the impassable sea. Again they began to carp at Moses. They clamored that any life at all would be better than this place between death and destruction. They were caught, really caught with no exit, no place to go. Why had he brought them to this nowhere place?

DEVELOPMENT I would like to focus on this idea of the nowhere place. It seems to me that the nowhere place is a fact of existence for most of us. There are many circumstances and many situations in life which seem like nowhere places; for instance - here is the person who has come to realize that he no longer finds satisfaction in his job. It is a dead end and he has lost all sense of creativity about it. He would like to move, but he has no real skills that would make him useful at anything else. He has given his life to this one thing, and now he is caught. He is unhappy where he is, but he has no place to go. He is in the nowhere place.

Or here is the person who has discovered that he has an incurable disease. He is not in trouble now, but he knows there will be hard times ahead. He would like to get married, perhaps start a family, but he has no idea where he will be around long enough to provide them any security. He can't really concentrate on a career for the same reason. He seems at a dead end, and he cannot accept that his life is merely a time of waiting. He is at the nowhere place.

Or here is a teacher confronted by demands from rebelling students that he must change his style of teaching, that what he has been doing through these years isn't relevant now. He would like to move to some new style, but try as he will he cannot get the faintest understanding of how he could do it. He isn't sure what his students are really asking, and he surely doesn't know how to go about providing it. Besides, he is hurt and angry that his years of work have been made so light of. He is in the nowhere place.

Or, here is an institution....it might be church or college or government, charged with irrelevancy and discrimination, trying hard to listen to what is being said to it. But it also hears and remembers what it has thought it was trying to do in the past. Its feelings are tender when it seems that nothing that has been done before is worth anything now. It knows that it will probably have to change its

style of life, but many people in the stitution are happy with the style they have now. Why, they complain, should somebody come in and upset things? Why couldn't they have left things the way they were? Let them go someplace else and change. Why do they want to change us? They are caught in the nowhere place.

The nowhere place is a reality at many levels of life. It touches us all when we are caught in choises that seem equally impossible to face. The real question, the one to which I would like to address myself this morning, is the question of what you do when you come to the this place in your life. How do you handle being in the nowhere place.

BACK TO THE PAST

One option we have....it is not a very option, but it is one possible choice....is to go back to the past. This is what a great many of the Hebrews were prepared to do....admit that it had all been a mistake. They thought that this was really the better choice. After all, they would die in the desert. No matter how difficult their enslavement had been, no matter how much harder it would be now, at least there had been some security about it. They wer ready to return to it in a minute if they could get out of this terrible nowhere place.

The possibility of going back is one which seems to have an appeal to many people. In times of stress it seems to gather more and more support. Pressure has a way of making this alternative seem better than it really is. You do not have to be part of the generation gap to wich that things could get back to a calmer, happier era. I am fond of those lines from the Fantasticks "Try to remember the kind of September when life was slow and oh so mellow". All of us feel that way now and then.

But going bqck is not a solution to anything; it is only a regression. Once you have moved along the way you can never go back again and be as you were before. There was a time when the only accepted standards in sculpture were those that showed the human figure in its idealixed form. Museums are filled with statues which show figures of heroic and ideal proportion but which are curiously lifeless. Eventually there were sculptors who insisted that figures ought to look like real people even though imperfect. Since then it is just not possible for art to go back down the road of idealization.

We are never free to go back to a past era and have it be as it was before. The world in which past standards operated is now gone and the past does not apply. I hear people trying to go back to a day when America was an isolationist nation, uninvolved in the rest of the world. But this simply is not possible now. I hear people wanting to go back to a time when a quick show of force would show who was the master, but the present has surely taught us that war cannot solve anything. We can't go back even if we want to.