

HAVE WE LOST OUR NERVE?

Scripture Reading: Genesis 12:1-7, RSV

When God risks, He risks big. If you will forgive me for speaking anthropomorphically about God, he has “chutzpah,” nerve. He is not afraid to do bold things. One of God’s boldest decisions is recorded in Genesis 12:1, 2:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

The man to whom God is speaking is 75 years old. Isn’t it a little ridiculous to ask a man advanced in years to be a pioneer, a trailblazer? Isn’t this the time in life to begin to think about sitting in the rocking chair and watching the Florida sunsets? This is not the time to uproot the whole family and start a new nation!

In a moving testimony to the great faith this man had in God’s leading, the Scriptures say simply: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen. 12:3, 4)

The God who made bold decisions, who was not afraid to take risks, picked a man who was equally unafraid to take risks, someone who was not so tied to his past that he would fail to seize the future. He still had some “chutzpah,” some daring. He was willing to get out of the “business-as-usual syndrome” that limits so many and attempt something mighty for God, something almost unthinkable.

When Abram (or “Abraham”) responded to God’s bold initiative, he entered into a covenant with God. In other words, his special relationship with God placed certain demands on him. As long as Abraham responded to God’s call in faith, he was righteous. It did not mean Abraham or Israel had to be perfect, only that they had to be continually in a relationship with God. Yahweh had chosen them. That was prior to all laws and demands. Israel might break the covenant but it could not escape its relationship with God. He had chosen Abraham and all his descendants. That was the primary fact. Yahweh never breaks an agreement, even if we do,

But there are many ways to break our covenant with God—rebellion, insensitivity—all those things. I have a feeling, though, that there is one way we sometimes miss. You see it in the experience of Israel (Abraham’s “nation”) when they came up to Canaan for the first time:

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. (Numbers 13:25-28.)

They lost their nerve. What frightened them? Oh, the countryside was beautiful; the land is rich and lush. But the cities, they are fortified; they are dangerous places. The people in them are much bigger

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then we and more violent. We do not have a chance. After all we are a small group of people in comparison, poorly equipped, vulnerable because we are nomads with no strong walls around us.

The Scriptures continue:

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it." Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we..."

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry; and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Numbers 13:30-31; 14:1-3, RSV.)

These are the children of Abraham? These are the descendants of a 75-year-old man who could not be intimidated by a frightening call, who by himself and a few of his relatives left almost everything that gave them security to go into a foreign country? Only people who have moved completely from one culture and from one area to another can begin to appreciate this.

Moses, Aaron and Joshua plead with the people:

"The land which we passed through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with *us* [italics supplied]; do not fear them." But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. (Numbers 14:7-10, RSV.)

The apostle Paul tells us that all who claim to be God's children go back to Abraham: "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

I want us to ask ourselves this question (and I'm sure we've asked this question about the Israelites): Are we (they) the children of Abraham? It is easy for us to be comfortable and smugly criticize the Israelites for lack of nerve, for their failure to be bold in the name of God. It is far more difficult to see ourselves in a similar way. If the shoe fits, however, we ought to be bold enough to put it on.

What frightened ancient Israel in this challenge was the cities. The people in these cities were armed to the teeth; they were vicious, ruthless warriors.

Dag Hammarskjold made a comment about politics and human life in general that applies to the church: "It is when we all play safe that we create a world of utmost insecurity."

Yahweh was consternated. "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?" (Numbers 14:11)

Today what frightens the church more than anything else is what frightened Israel: We are afraid of the cities. It is more difficult to get people to come and work in the cities, whether they are pastors or teachers, etc. In most of the major cities of North America, the church has a small presence at best. Cities tend to be the centers of secular thinking, and people are afraid of them—intellectually, morally and physically afraid. Just like the ancient Israelites, when we look at the cities we tend to see the walls. We say to ourselves, "We can't do it." And we lose our nerve.

There is the wall of numbers. There are so many people and we're so small. How can we do anything significant to help these people to find peace of mind, freedom from guilt and gain an understanding of the gospel? We see the wall of expense. It costs so much to live and work in the city. We see the wall of evil. The cities are so wicked that good people cannot allow themselves to be exposed to it.

We see the wall of sophistication: these people are too worldly wise, too educated, too cultured to be reached by the good news. Their pride has cut them off from God's saving grace.

We see the wall of competition: so many religions, so many preachers, so many lifestyles are available. In such a buffet or smorgasbord of different belief systems, who is going to notice anything as small and insignificant as the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, even if it is unique in many ways?

Whenever we begin to think and to feel that way, we need to go back and reread the words of Caleb:

If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us...do not fear the people of the land [do not fear the walls]; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.

Caleb saw the fortified walls. But he saw God's call more clearly! Please do not misunderstand me nor the Bible. Neither the Scriptures nor I are saying that it will be easy; it will be hard. It will require courage, self-denial, perseverance, intelligence, prayer, commitment and love of people. But the Lord is with us. Do not fear them.

Mother Theresa has said, "Give the young something hard to do for Jesus and they will respond." I believe we can give adults something hard and they also will respond.

Christians worth their salt don't want easy things to do. We want to be stretched for the gospel. These people in the cities need the gospel. They need forgiveness. They need freedom from guilt. They need goals that transcend getting a big name or making more money. They need security that this world with its nuclear bombs will never be able to give. They need a relationship with a supreme person who will never betray them or leave them, no matter how unlovable or messed up they are. They need the Lord Jesus Christ!

And God needs his people. He has chosen to need us. He has made a covenant with us. Are we going to be the children of Abraham?

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I have a dream for the Sligo Church: That we will be the children of Abraham, that we will hear the call of God and make it our own. My dream is that the Sligo Church will care about the city. We'll work for the city. We'll not be intimidated by the city but will see the city as Jesus saw it—as multitudes who had no shepherd, as scattered sheep. Others may do as they wish in relationship to the cities. The call of the Scriptures is clear.

I want young people who are looking for jobs to say to themselves: I will be a missionary to the city. I will get work in the city and I will do it in order to help evangelize the city. We have no compunctions about sending young people to the most dangerous places in the world—to the jungles, to the mountaintops, etc. We don't worry about them being in danger. For some reason the minute we talk about a city, we feel our young people shouldn't be there because it's dangerous.

I drove through a large county in Virginia last year that had fewer people in it than a one square mile area that I grew up in in Brooklyn. We talk about "dark counties" where we need to spread the gospel and that's true. When you think in terms of the people, however, there are virtually no people there in comparison of the cities.

We need leaders and members who will not be afraid to take big risks. They need to be able to reorder priorities as to how we will do the work we have been asked to do by God. We need people who are not afraid to make human contact with their neighbors and their fellow workers. We are talking about a tact that is soaked in boldness.

Abraham was told to go from his father's house to a land that he did not know well. He went as the Lord had told him. Because Abraham was faithful to God's call and his promise, God blessed him. Four hundred years later his descendants did not have the nerve of Abraham.

Isn't it time we had the nerve to possess the land? Isn't it time we stopped being afraid of the walled cities?