

Unexpected Errands

Sermon by Robert Peel
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We're all familiar with errands as one of the minor nuisances of daily or domestic life. You know the sort of thing: "Don't forget to stop by the dry cleaner's on the way home, dear, and pick up Ellie's slacks." Those of us who like to think of ourselves as committed to highly significant tasks and lofty interests manage to survive these random little demands on our time and good nature, but we're not exactly keen about them. We may even say rather rebelliously on occasion, "I'm not your errand boy."

However, there's an older and nobler use of the word errand. Our ancestors used to speak of holy errands. The early Puritans who came to this continent to plant the kingdom of God on its inhospitable shores liked to refer to their venture as an "errand into the wilderness." Of course, we're apt to be very conscious today of the economic motives and the interacting sociocultural patterns and forces involved in that historic enterprise, but the Puritan leaders themselves had no doubt that they were on a religious errand. They were confident that God Himself had sent them on it, chosen them for it, and they couldn't fail -- so long as they remained obedient to His revealed intent. In their eyes there was a distinct advantage in being God's errand boy.

Now all this may seem completely irrelevant to our day and age. Surely we're too scientifically sophisticated to believe in holy errands~ We can leave that to the assorted fanatics and terrorists who believe they're acting in a sacred Cause. Or can we? Is there a possibility that each of us can find an impelling purpose that transcends our experience yet enables us to bring to that experience an element of creativity or sheer novelty that is uniquely ours -- and in a larger sense uniquely us?

This is where the experience of Moses at the burning bush has a strangely contemporary application. Moses was facing an identity crisis. Starting off as a Hebrew foundling and brought up as an Egyptian prince, he'd thrown away all the personal advantages of his acquired status through his impulsive murder of an Egyptian overseer who'd been abusing Moses' fellow Hebrews. Now here he was, off in the wilderness, a refugee from justice, leading the life of a wandering shepherd, wondering who he was and why he was.

Then suddenly he turns aside to contemplate the burning bush. In his own heart is an unquenchable blaze of concern for the plight of his people in Egypt, a burning desire for their freedom, and also a yearning that they might catch the vision of their God' that would restore their moral and spiritual identity. Out of that fire comes the voice of God telling him that that's exactly what he's supposed to do -- go down to Egypt and tell ol' Pharaoh to let my people go. And immediately his own identity crisis becomes a stumbling block, and he asks, "Who am I?" Who am I that I should undertake this virtually impossible task?

And God gives a very peculiar answer: “I AM THAT I AM. Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” Moses was to see that he drew his very identity not from the equivocal, chance circumstances of his birth and upbringing and fluctuating fortunes but from his confrontation of ultimate reality, of what Paul Tillich would call the ground of his being, the divine purpose that man fulfill his highest potentialities, individually and collectively. Grasping that, he could then say: What I am has sent me on this holy errand. And because the liberating purpose of that errand was rooted in the far greater purpose of Life itself, it was endowed with a power and authority far beyond any that could be achieved through mere personal charisma or egocentric drive.

Now what does that have for us today – for me, little ol’ me, over here in my own limited set of circumstances, acting in a certain way and believing certain things because I happen to have been born at a certain moment of time in a certain cultural milieu with a certain genetic inheritance and to have been exposed to certain conditioning influences? How am I to find what I really am, the core of my being, and therefore my purpose in being – my *raison d’être*? Am I really nothing more than the chance product of random forces, even when I act under what seems to me to be purposive intelligence? Though I may not aspire to be a Moses leading an entire people to a new life in a promised land, isn’t there some unique purpose for me, some errand in life that I’ve been sent to perform?

The word “sent” is very crucial to this concept. We know, of course, that all the great prophets of history have felt that they were sent to do a great work. Sometimes they undertook it with fear and trembling. Like Moses. And like Jeremiah, when he heard a divine voice telling him that he was ordained to speak up for God:

“Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.”

Jesus Christ, above all the prophets, constantly had the illumined conviction that he was sent by his Father on a rescue mission to the world. Does this word “sent” suggest an anthropomorphic God off somewhere in outer space, looking at this pathetic little planet of ours and saying to Himself, “I’m going to send someone in there to see what he can do to clear up that mess”? Or does it rather suggest the appearing in history of a figure so supremely sure of the ground of his being, so at—one with the divine purpose of the universe, that his every thought and act were impelled by the power that shapes history rather than being merely tossed about by it? Does it suggest the mission of someone who knew that he drew his being from a source infinitely greater than material circumstance?

To use a rather fanciful metaphor, take a ray of light that reaches earth from the sun. It derives its nature from the sun. You might say poetically that the sun sends it to earth. Its simple mission is to be itself, to serve its appointed purpose in the larger order of things. If it shines on a rose garden it helps the roses to grow. If it shines on a garbage heap it helps the garbage to decompose. Earth may define its mundane function, but the sun defines its inherent being. Thus Jesus could say with the humility of absolute dependence on his divine source, “I can of mine

own self do nothing” – the Father that sent me, the Father that dwells in me, He does the works by which I show you what His purpose for mankind really is.

Well, you may say, that’s all right. I’m a Christian; I believe that Christ is the Son of God. Or: I’m not a Christian, but I grant you Jesus derived a good deal of power from the belief that he was the Christ, or the Son of God. But how about me? I’m just me – with no very clear idea of what that means.

What it may mean is that we’re a little closer to Moses in the wilderness looking for his identity than we are to the Galilean teacher whose whole life demonstrated what man ideally is. That is, what man is when he recognizes his individual sonship with God – a God who is the ground of all true being. We may have to encounter some startling circumstance or challenge before we’re ready to confront that great fact. And such encounters are usually unexpected. Suddenly we feel ourselves compelled to ‘look at a burning desire or unquenched hope we may have nurtured, some urgency that fires us with a longing for more meaning in our lives – and then with total unexpectedness we get the real message this has for us.

It may be a small signal or a large signal, but what it signals is a very momentous fact. In the face of all the behavioral explanations, the psycho-biographical and sociobiological theories, the quantitative measurements, the statistical analyses, the immense know – how of modern science and technology, the fact emerges that there is such a thing as a spiritual ground of being, there are such things as love and trust and integrity and courage and value – and newness. We can’t operate in daily life without unconsciously assuming such a ground, but only when it emerges to us as conscious unassailable fact do we gain a glimpse of our own essential purpose and identity. For only then do we recognize ourselves as rooted and grounded in an ultimate reality that is also infinite possibility. Surely the big revelation here is that we’re not basically dependent on our past history and present circumstances but on the divine purpose that animates creation, on the Principle of unlimited good to which we traditionally give the name of God and whose nature is summed up by the word Love.

The founder of my own church, Mary Baker Eddy, put it very simply in these terms: “As a material, theoretical life-basis is found to be a misapprehension of existence, the spiritual and divine Principle of man dawns upon human thought, and leads it to ‘where the young child was,’ – even to the birth of a new-old idea, to the spiritual sense of being and of what Life includes.”

Of course, we don’t all use the same words to describe such a revelation. To Moses it was the revelation of I AM THAT I AM, and that’s a phrase that has been deeply meaningful to those of us who belong to the Judaic-Christian tradition. But however we phrase it, once we’ve been grasped by this transcendent reality, we can always say to whatever finite circumstance we meet, “I AM hath sent me unto you.” For our whole life is actually an errand for the divine Love that intended us to demonstrate its infinite possibilities.

Actually this is something very concrete and practical, not remote or grandiose. I’ve looked around for the simplest possible incident to illustrate it, and since this is Parents’ Weekend at Cornell the example that came to my mind may be especially appropriate.

It's the experience of a colleague of mine with his young son, who was then about four years old. My friend had been going through rather a difficult time in his personal and professional life, encountering some frustrating circumstances that didn't seem to yield either to his efforts or his prayers, and he was feeling pretty discouraged. One day he was driving his car with his young son sitting beside him. Of course, the little fellow knew nothing about my friend's difficulties, but he evidently felt something, for he suddenly put his hand on his father's arm and said, "Daddy, God loves you." What followed was an instant, complete reversal of my friend's whole attitude to the frustrating circumstances, and as a result the difficulties that had seemed insurmountable simply melted away. Even a physical disorder that had been plaguing him during this experience disappeared along with the troublesome and seemingly objective circumstances.

Now, why on earth would I compare that to Moses' experience? Well, I'd say the little chap suddenly discovered that he was God's errand boy and accepted the assignment. More precisely, one might say that the revelation involved had to do with the nature of love. In the first place, the child had enough love to feel his father's need. In the second place, he had enough love to want to do something about it. And in the third place, he recognized this as something infinitely larger than a personal desire. He might have said, "Daddy, I love you," and that would undoubtedly have been somewhat comforting to his father; but I doubt that it would have healed the situation to the degree it did. The all-important point was that the boy recognized his love as the expression of the divine Love at the core of being – as the Love that makes man and remakes humanity in its own image and likeness.

This is what gave his words a power away beyond his four short years of experience – or inexperience. I might add that this same boy is now a university senior, doing brilliantly but still showing that quality of spiritual intuition and loving concern that reflects something of the divine Love. He's still attentive to whatever larger errand life may have for him.

Not being used to giving sermons, this is an unexpected errand for me. The temptation comes to all of us at times; perhaps not to some people; some people seem infinitely confident of themselves but confident in a way that is more self-willed; self-assurance that they can accomplish anything that they set their hand to and that's that. But for most of us there comes the sort of doubt in which we feel that whether we really can do that which is required of us. And I think at such a time we have to remind ourselves that we are all part of a vast joint enterprise, a joint enterprise of humanity in a world that can all too easily look like a wilderness.

We are really called, all of us, to an errand to the wilderness. And the best that we can often do is to share out of our own experience something of that common ground that we all have, but which comes to us in unique ways in our own experience. It isn't a matter of telling others what to do but of our sharing with each other something of what we have glimpsed at our own private little burning bushes. And we can remind ourselves at such a time that underneath the complexities of life, there are great simplicities. And perhaps if we have the humility to receive those simplicities we will be given our particular errand.

And with that, I'd like to end with two verses from Psalms which put it right back where I think it belongs, and that's in God's hands.

“O send thy light and thy truth. Let them lead me, Let them bring me unto thy holy hill and to thy tabernacles. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.”