

"Called To Greatness"
Lloyd J. Averill

You have a right to be told, I think, that the most important thing I have to say here I have taken from someone else's sermon.

Not that there is anything unusual in that. We preachers are doing it all the time. The most important things we say are not our own. That is not because we are too unambitious or preoccupied to think up new ideas. It is, rather, because we become preachers in the first place, not because a message has to be found, but because a message has found us. We are its servants, not its creators.

But I am digressing. I ~~started~~ to explain where this sermon came from. I found it in an old record of what may well be one of the first recorded sermons in history. Certainly it is one of the first. It does not bear a very imposing or imaginative title--you might, indeed, say that it is frankly obscure--but that is not the fault of the one who preached it, for I doubt that he entitled it at all. Some later editor gave it the name of "Deuteronomy," which means literally "the second law." The preacher, of course, was Moses, certainly one of history's chief architects, and therefore a man well worth listening to.

I.

The situation to which that ancient sermon spoke was not greatly different from our own situation. Moses was addressing a group of men and women who faced a future not unlike our own. At least, their future was described in language which is common to speakers in our own time. They were about to go, those ancient Israelites were told, unto a world full of fabulous promise, rich with material reward, "flowing with milk and honey." Can't you hear the echo of that as men and women today are invited to consider their "great future in a growing America?"

And yet there were hazards to be faced in that lush, luxuriant world of long ago. Giants stalked across the land and threatened to annihilate all who fell in their way. The cities of that land were armed up to the skies, seemingly immovable from their warlike purposes. Reading that in the ancient record, who can fail to see the fiendish figures of our own time stalking the world, intent upon death and destruction. Tyranny, war, hatred, greed, colossal blindness, lethal power--these are our giants whose shadow falls malignly over our fair and fecund earth. Or who can fail to see our own cities, ringed with missiles poised to fly to predetermined targets across the world, and covered with an aerial umbrella of prowling monsters filled with hydrogen bombs. Armed to the skies, indeed; for what was a figure of speech for the Israelite thirteen centuries before Christ is literal fact for the man of the twentieth century after Christ.

So we are more nearly contemporary with the men and women of that ancient time than we might think at first. And I am sure that, although I am far from being a Moses, I stand approximately

where he stood. Surely he must have wrestled as I have with what he ought to say on that occasion. What, indeed, can one say that would possibly make a difference to those who are poised at the edge of a world both thrilling and threatening, alternately bright with promise and dark with doubt?

II.

This is what he said to them, and I make bold to claim his words as my own, for I know of nothing better to be said:

"...this command which I am enjoining upon you today," he said, "is not beyond your power, it is not beyond your reach; it is not up in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us and bring it down to us and let us hear it, that we may do it?' --nor is it over the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?' No, the word is very near you, it is on your lips and in your mind, to be obeyed."

How does that strike you? What difference does it make to you where you sit at this moment? Well, if it makes any difference at all, it will probably be because these words of Moses force you to reexamine your entire way of thinking about your world and its problems. It will be because you find in his words the clue to the location of the real vital center in the world's struggle between decency and degeneracy. It will be because you find in those words a new understanding of your own role in that struggle, because he helps you to discover the power for playing out that role in a way which you have never seen it before.

That is, after all, the real issue for most of us, isn't it? If we are apprehensive about the world into which we are being thrust, our apprehension springs from not knowing quite how to handle it. Or, to put the matter more exactly, we can't seem to get a handle on it at all. Everything seems too big for our grasp. Take almost any concrete problem--the armaments race, for example, or racial conflict, or a growing crime rate. What can you do about any one of those, let alone all of them? What can you do to touch them where it will count? What can you do to change the direction in which they are carrying us pellmell? Most of us think we know the answers to those questions. The answer is that there is nothing we can do.

Why? Well, because the real center of every one of those problems, we think, is beyond our reach. The armaments race is directed from behind closed doors in Washington and Moscow, with an occasional act of international blackmail in Cairo or Jakarta to complicate matters the more. The seat of racial conflict is deep in southern legislatures and white citizens councils and the mores of a whole people. And crime erupts from such varied sources that it even defies organized combat, let alone individual defiance.

These are the assumptions which we have allowed to control our response to the world around us. If there is an answer to problems like these, some one else must surely have it. If God Himself has an answer, as indeed He must, He has at least kept it to Himself. This is how we think.

And Moses says, You're thinking wrong! Not that there isn't some plausibility to this way of thinking. Problems are difficult. Issues are complex. Not that there isn't also some convenience in this way of thinking. It is a very easy out from responsibility. But it's wrong for all that. This command which I am enjoining upon you today is not beyond your power, it is not beyond your reach." It is not up in heaven, that you should say, if only we could read the mind of God, then we would know what to do. It is not over the sea, that you should say, if only we knew the mind of the Russians, then we would know what to do. "No, the word is very near you, it is on your lips and in your mind, to be obeyed."

III.

What is this word? It is this, first. What our times require--and what you need to live fully and effectively in our world--is a new discovery that the vital center of the world's struggle is in the lives of ordinary individuals. And what Moses saw, the modern historian corroborates. Sir Alfred Zimmern, teacher at Oxford and one of the world's leading experts on international affairs, was once asked, "What, in your opinion, is the greatest obstacle between us and the building of enduring world peace?" He answered without hesitation: "The small-scale individual." There it is. Not presidents and prime ministers, not financiers and king-makers, not shaddowy figures in obscure rooms, but the small-scale individual.

The fact is that you and I have been taken in by history's greatest hoax. We have come to believe that the world's problems are beyond us because there are men and women who have wanted us to believe that, who have encouraged our believing it, and who have profited by our believing it. Even in our own nation,

built as it is upon democratic ideals, founded upon the town-meeting and individual political initiative and responsibility, we have been encouraged to believe it. Political organizations in the cities, or in the rural districts for that matter, run more smoothly for their bosses if the ordinary citizen can be convinced that he doesn't matter, if his sense of helplessness is encouraged. Foreign policy can be formulated with far less difficulty by those who are inflexibly committed to some dogma of international politics if the ordinary citizen can be convinced that his distance from the State Department renders him ineffective. Merchandisers and advertisers can make a far more handsome profit through the manipulation of our tastes and desires if the ordinary consumer can be convinced not to bother about scrutinizing advertising methods and merchandising claims. Labor leaders can build empires of power and wealth if the ordinary working man can be convinced that he is powerless in the face of the organization.

And we have been perfectly willing to be hoaxed, most of us. It is sometimes dangerous, to be an individual with opinions, intent upon expressing them, determined to make them count for every ounce of their weight. Moreover, it is sometimes inconvenient. It represents a break with routine, a risk of the conventional values and involvements on which so much of our security rests. So W. H. Auden writes,

We haven't the time--it's been such a rush--
Except to attend to our little push:
The teacher setting examinations,
The journalist writing his falsifications,
The judge enforcing the obsolete law,
The banker making the loan for the war,
The expert designing the long-range gun
To exterminate everyone under the sun,
Would like to get out, but can only mutter,
"What can I do? It's my bread and butter!"

So we succumb to the hoax and resign from responsible participation in history. And the result is that, even when the moment comes when the fulcrum by which a problem could be lifted is located where we stand, we are not ready because we have been willing

to believe that it would never come. When the call to greatness comes, we have no answer.

But here and there, now and then, there is a man or woman who has not been taken in and who, when that call comes, rises to meet it. And history is changed because of it. Martin Luther King is just such a man; and the day the bomb dropped on his front porch, he was ready. In many respects you would have thought Martin Luther King a rather ordinary person before that day came. Some would have thought him an inferior person, simply because he was a Negro. Some might have conceivably thought him an unimportant person, because he was a minister. His gifts, so far as I know them, are not extraordinary. He has a good mind, to be sure; good enough to earn a doctor of philosophy degree. He is an acceptable speaker, but not an outstanding one. After completing his educational preparation, he accepted a call to become pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama, and there he went about the very ordinary duties of his pastoral ministry.

Then in 1954 the Supreme Court made its momentous decision to outlaw the "separate but equal" doctrine by which the South had dealt with its Negroes, and the storm warnings began to fly all through the South. In Montgomery the issue came to a head in seating in public busses, and the Negroes of the city began a bus boycott, which was organized by the Montgomery Improvement Association, of which Dr. King was the president. One night, while he was away from home attending a meeting, a bomb was thrown from a car of passing white men and exploded on the front porch of his house, causing considerable damage. His wife fled safely out the back door with the baby. In no time at all a furious crowd of Negroes had gathered in front of the house, armed with various weapons and intent upon avenging this latest violent indignity. Called quickly home from his meeting, Dr. King confronted that crowd with these words: "Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them. I did not start this boycott. I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it known to the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped this movement will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us."

And in that moment something entered the complicated relations between the races in the South which had not been there before, and which has spread to other southern communities, so that the problem may be brought to its knees within our generation. Martin Luther King has become a symbol of new hope for the reconciliation of man with man, not in the South alone but throughout the world. When history called him up, he was not bewildered and unprepared; he was ready. And your history and mine will be different because of it.

And Martin Luther King is not so rare as we might think at first. History is written by ordinary individuals who were ready to respond when the moment of their individual destiny came. If we find it difficult to think of them as ordinary, that is only because we see them after their moment has arrived rather than before. As strange as it may seem to say it, the world's best example of the influence of the ordinary individual is Jesus Christ. Does that seem an inappropriate description of him? Then recall how one unknown author has written of him:

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompanies greatness. He had no credentials but himself....While still a young man the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying, and that was his coat. When he was dead he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

How ironic, when we remember a saying that was current in Palestine during his time: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

If we were to list the world's most important cities, I suppose we too would turn to the largest and wealthiest of them: London, New York, Chicago, Rome, Alexandria, Paris, Byzantium. But Nazareth is joined by Dole, France; Hodgenville, Ky.; Staunton, Virginia; Domremy, France; Shrewsbury, England; Eisleben, Germany; Livingston Manor, New York; and Florence, Italy. For these were the homes of Louis Pasteur, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Joan of Arc, Charles Darwin, Martin Luther, John R. Mott, and Florence Nightingale. Is it inconceivable that your own hometown might be added to that list, raised to importance among the world's cities by some ordinary individual who heard the call to greatness and responded.

No one can predict when your call to greatness may come. No one can say what the issues will be, or what the stakes, or what the cost to you. No one can tell how many lives may be touched or changed. But when it comes, do not expect that lights will flash and bells will ring to announce it. It may steal quietly upon you without warning. Do not expect that it will come where you have prepared for it carefully in advance. You may practice for law, and it will come in the home. You may practice for medicine, and it will come in public service. You may operate a business, and it will come in some humanitarian cause. You may work in shop, or office, or home, and it will meet you unexpectedly in the street.

You will be ready to meet it if, and only if, your whole life is built upon the kind of steady determination which Bonaro Overstreet expressed so well when she wrote,

You say the little efforts that I make
Will do no good;
They never will prevail
To tip the hovering scale
Where justice hangs in balance.
I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right to choose which side shall feel
The stubborn ounces of my weight.

"This command which I am enjoining upon you today is not beyond your power, it is not beyond your reach. It is not up in Heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us and bring it down to us and let us hear it, that we may do it?--nor is it over the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?' No, the word is very near you, it is on your lips and in your mind, to be obeyed."

IV.

Now, I suppose that some of you are saying, This is all very well, and I see the point of it. Of course the ordinary individual can be important, can turn the drift of history. But not me.

That's the way we usually respond. When the talk turns to heroes, we immediately assume the reference is to somebody else. As for me, we say, I am not strong enough; or if I am strong enough, I am not smart enough; or if I am smart enough, I am not good enough; or if I am good enough, I am not eloquent enough.

If you had talked that way to Moses, he certainly would have recognized the sentiment. And he had good reason. We think of him as the leader of a courageous people of religious genius, whose march from slavery to a new life in Canaan opened a new phase in human history. Of course it did. But the Israelites were probably history's most reluctant heroes, protesting their frailty and inadequacy with nearly every step; and their religious genius consisted of falling for every kind of pagan idolatry along the way! We think of Moses himself as one of the most remarkable of men, giving us that exalted moral code which is rooted deep in western culture, the Ten Commandments. Of course he did. But he was born of slave parents; and although he was given scholarship aid and was brought up in the royal household of Egypt, that did not prevent him from turning into a juvenile delinquent by setting his hand to murder and running away to escape prosecution. He was a fugitive working as a humble shepherd when his call to greatness came.

And how did he answer? "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel, out of Egypt? They will ask me where I got my authority, and what will I tell them? They won't believe me or listen to me, for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Sounds familiar, doesn't it.

And the truth is that Moses was right. He was one man against one of the most powerful empires of the ancient world. He was no match for the problem of slavery and oppression in Egypt. He was not strong enough, or smart enough, or good enough, or eloquent enough.

And neither are you. If that sounds like the contradiction of everything I have said until now, I want to show you that it isn't.

If you think of the history of your times as a chaotic field of forces going it blind, in which sheer chance is the only arbiter of man's destiny, then of course you are no match for it. Well, whatever other men may believe, the Jew and the Christian cannot believe that. Far from being chaotic, we believe that history is going some place. Far from being a matter of chance, we believe that history is under orders. You see, the world did not come into existence by some kind of gigantic cosmic exertion. The world was created by God. And He who is the Lord of Creation is the Lord of history also. If you ask where history is going, then the Christian will point to Jesus Christ and say, "God is aiming at life like that." If you ask, what are the orders history is under, then the Christian will answer, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and thy neighbor as thyself." So men and movements of men who ignore God's will for human life will ultimately break themselves upon that will. It is God who is the Lord of human history, and no one else; it is God who is the Lord of personal destiny, and no one else.

Now what does that mean for you? It means this: if God has a purpose for history, He has a purpose for you too. Let me point out one thing you may not have noticed. I have not said one word about your chance for greatness. I doubt that any of us has much chance for greatness, for this is not a chance universe, and real greatness is not to be had for the seizing. You are not strong enough for that; or smart enough, or good enough, or eloquent enough. I have spoken only of a call to greatness. Each of us has a calling from God, some work which He has for us to do in the world, some role for us to play in moving history toward the goal which He has purposed for it. True greatness lies in responding to that call when it comes; and God has a way of bearing up the weak and filling the empty who hear His word and do it.

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 on wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

So Moses and Martin Luther King--yes, and Jesus Christ as well--had they simply seized the chance of the moment would have fallen before the weight of history's opposition. They were called to opportunity, and responding found power to complete what they had been given to do. And history is different because of it.

I doubt that we have much of a chance for greatness. I think we may have a call to greatness; the word of God coming to us and saying, This is the task I have for you to fulfill for your time, and my strength is sufficient for you.

"This command which I am enjoining upon you today is not beyond your power, it is not beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us and bring it down to us and let us hear it, that we may do it?'-- nor is it over the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?' No, the word is very near you, it is on your lips and in your mind, to be obeyed."