

Mission as Hope in Action

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My assigned topic, "Mission as Hope in Action," brings into suggestive configuration three crucial accents that may preoccupy us in Lent.

Hope is the beginning point. It is a *human enterprise* rooted in God's faithful promises, acting constructively toward a future intended but not in hand, acting in resistance against a settled present for the sake of the future to be given by God.

Mission is an undertaking wherein *faithful human response* converges with God's resolve for the future of the world. It is an enterprise convinced that something is to be done, to be enacted, not yet in hand but undertaken in the sureness that God will see the future through.¹

Action is the *risky human engagement* in a concrete, bodily way—powered by hope, shaped by missional imagination—in order to make a difference in the world, to reconfigure the interplay between God's intention and the reality of the world.

All three terms are oddly evangelical—rooted in the gospel; such an enterprise makes no sense in the conventional world which eschews hope, reduces mission to vested interest, and seeks only actions without life-or-death risk. Thus a bid for missional, hopeful action is always a summons to move outside whatever conventional world we inhabit.

I.

As the font of this odd configuration that is gospel-rooted, we may consider the strange case of Moses in Exodus 3. Israel's storytellers signal at the outset that coming to this gospel-shaped version of reality is no ordinary thing, precisely because it is rooted in the elusive, enigmatic account of the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6). That is, it is rooted beyond our explanatory capacity, shrouded in hiddenness with a staggering power to disrupt and to compel the subject (Moses) into a wholly new vocation, a calling of *active, missional hope*.

From the bush comes the utterance of the holy, hidden One (Ex. 3:7-10). This utterance is completely unexpected by Moses, ungrounded in any of his categories of expectation, a vocation-creating *novum* in which YHWH makes promises that set the world in a new direction. The promises are grand and evocative of Moses' hope. From now on Moses will be a hoper, completely convinced of a coming future for his slave community that falls outside the known world of Egyptian exploitation. The promise is a serious first-person, self-announcing declaration by YHWH:

I have observed the misery of my people,
I have heard their cry,
I know their sufferings,
I have come down to deliver...
to bring to a good land.

The cry of oppression has caught the attention of the Holy One who is now moved to

take new action (see 2:23-25). God will do all this. It is sure, not in doubt. This is God's own mission, to create a community of well-being from among the oppressed, outside imperial abusiveness. That is where the narrative is headed; YHWH takes the initiative by this promise for the future of Israel, the future of Egypt, and the future of the world.

But then, in verse 10, the oracle of promise turns unexpectedly to Moses as an imperative: "I will send you." Until verse 10, the mission was YHWH's; Moses could hear of YHWH's intention with elation. In that verse, however, the mission of YHWH becomes the mission of Moses. Moses is to run the risks that will guarantee a new social possibility in the world. It is Moses who must directly confront the powers of the empire with the alternative of emancipation. The Exodus, intended by YHWH, is to be wrought by human daring and courage. The mission of God—now the mission of Moses—calls for concrete action in the empire.

It does not surprise us that Moses firmly resists this awesome assignment, offering in quick succession five objections (Ex. 3:11-4:17).² The objections are attempts to evade active responsibility, to resist missional responsibility, to leave things with "master and slaves" as they are, undisturbed by YHWH's missional initiative.

But of course this mission-initiating God will not let the mission-resisting Moses off the hook. The five resistances are readily answered by YHWH's five responses, and the responses of YHWH are in the end more important than the objections. YHWH's assurance is essentially a reiteration of the promises of 3:7-9:

I will bring you out (v. 17);
You shall not go empty-handed (v. 21).

In the end, YHWH will take full responsibility: Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? (4:11).

Moses' resistances rooted in fear are vetoed by YHWH; he is sent on his dangerous mission before the court of Pharaoh. For all the robust rhetoric of YHWH, however, he has nothing to go on except this sovereign insistence of fidelity that requires his courageous activity. And of course, it is this mandate, rooted in holy power, that brings him to Pharaoh and sets in motion the defining emancipation in the story of the world.³

II.

For our purposes and for the ministry of Lent, however, the Mosaic embrace of "Mission as Hope in Action" is too exotic, too daring, and too spectacular for almost any of us, even if he is the paradigmatic case of our faith. Fortunately, Moses himself provides a more mundane and concrete model for the matter, albeit still risky. In Exodus 3:21, as noted, Moses assured the Israelites that "you will not go empty-handed" (see 3:22; 11:2; 12:36); Moses authorizes the frontal transfer of wealth from the imperial "haves" to the escaping slave "have-nots." The catch-phrase "empty-handed," as David Daube has observed, turns up in Moses' pivotal teaching in Deuteronomy 15:13 concerning the "year of release" (Deut. 15:1-18).⁴ This instruction, unlike the narrative account of Exodus 3, contains nothing as elusive and enigmatic as a burning bush and nothing as risky as direct confrontation with Pharaoh. Rather it proposes a hands-on, completely doable economic act that is designed to enhance the neighborhood.⁵ The "year of release" provides a policy and procedure for

the limitation on debts and requires that “haves” recognize “have-nots” as neighbors who are to be cared for and protected, so that they can participate viably and with dignity in the economic interaction of the community. Moses affirms both that this act of debt cancellation is urgent because there are always poor people in debt (v. 11), and that if this year of release is done diligently and generously, there need be no poor people (v. 4). Moses understands that it is the deep and defining practice of long-term debt that eventually disables community. The “empty handed” teaching in verse 13 provides that the poor shall not only have debts cancelled, because left empty-handed they will soon cause their debt to reappear, so that positive *reparations* are required beyond debt cancellation for the sake of the community.

Clearly the move from *burning bush* to *year of release* is to descend, as it were, from heaven to earth, from exotic religion to mundane economics. Our topic, moreover, suggests high-grade religious commitment and accomplishment, rather like old fashioned notions of “winning the world” for the Gospel. But biblical faith and biblical ethics are more characteristically earth-bound than that. The leap from burning bush to year of release is a characteristic move of covenantal faith, a move from *gift of God* to *love of neighbor*. While we notice the profound contrast between the two assertions of Exodus 3 and Deuteronomy 15, we might for our purposes more profitably notice the commonality in these two acts that are in resistance to being “empty-handed.”⁶ Indeed, the action authorized in the statute of Deuteronomy 15 is a repeatable Exodus enactment, whereby the ancient narrative miracle is presented as a necessary habit of the ongoing community. The year of release brings the indebted neighbor “out of the house of bondage” even as the slaves in Egypt were enslaved as debt-slaves (see Exodus 20:2). Thus the Exodus itself is an enactment of the year of release. As the statute of Deuteronomy 15 does not want the poor in the community to be empty-handed, so the narrative of Exodus 3 provides that the slaves departing Egypt will not be empty-handed.⁷

The commonality between the two, narrative and statute, pertains to all three elements of our theme.

Hope: The Exodus is rooted in God’s own hope for a new people in a new land. The year of release is rooted in God’s assurance, everywhere expressed in Deuteronomy, that the land of Canaan can and will be reorganized in covenantal, neighborly ways. Specifically, Deuteronomy 15:18 concludes with a promise, “Your God will bless you” when you act in neighborly ways. The anticipated blessing that grows out of neighborliness is clearly an act of hope.

Mission: It is God’s mission to emancipate the slaves from Egypt and to bring them to a new land, a mission that is assigned to Moses on behalf of YHWH. It is God’s mission, in the vision of Deuteronomy, to reorder the community of neighborliness, a goal that becomes the missional obligation of every Israelite in covenant toward neighbor. The practice of a generous economy is indeed a missional undertaking, not religiously exotic, but stark and daily.

Action: The mission grounded in hope requires concrete, bodily, daring action. Moses must run the risk of appearing insistently and defiantly before the court of pharaoh. The mandate for action in the instruction of Moses is not as dramatic as the Exodus. It nonetheless requires concrete, bodily, risky action, namely, the cancellation of debts that gives the enhancement of the neighbor priority over personal profitability. The risk dimension of this missional action is evident and readily recognized when this

biblical teaching is commonly regarded as “unreal” or at least only applicable to a small, agrarian economy, both attempts at evasion.

The linkage of *hope, mission and action*, so the Bible teaches, is grounded in God’s own holy resolve. In the Lenten season, however, it is important to recognize that the practice of this revolutionary, emancipatory faith takes the form of steady, daily, bodily, intentional neighbor acts.⁸ The “sacrificial” dimension of faith, about which we characteristically speak much in Lent, concerns the ceding of priority over to the neighbor, for what this hope-based mission will not tolerate is leaving a neighbor empty-handed. The refusal of empty-handedness for the neighbor of course invites endless parlor games about “the public sector” and “the private sector.” All of that, however, is secondary to the mandate and the vision that is consistent in our faith from the miracle narrative to the covenantal statute. What counts, rather than economic theory or ideology, is the *God who hopes* and the *neighbor who needs*. The mission, humanly speaking, is to enact a workable, transformative *connection* between *God’s hope* and *neighbor need*.

III.

Now of course, a focus on Moses, the Exodus, and the instruction of Deuteronomy does not first of all leap to mind in the Lenten season of the Church. I suggest that it would be a useful connection to make in the church to see that the hard tale of the Passion Narrative of Jesus from Friday to Sunday, is a closely retold tale of Israel’s move through wilderness to the new land.⁹ The instructions of Deuteronomy, moreover, are paralleled in the demands of discipleship on the lips of Jesus en route to death and then new life. The discipleship to which Jesus summons his people is not to be found in exotic religious acts, but in the slow, daily work of bringing the neighborhood under the rule of the one whose kingdom is “at hand.” The parallel is indeed worth the effort, because in both cases of ancient Israel and early Church, as in our own case as church, the story concerns an *alternative vision of the life of the world under the rule of the slave-freeing, wound-healing, covenant-making God*. This alternative vision is rooted in the will and purpose of God; but it is practiced concretely in risky, bodily acts by the people of this God.

The hope of God in the life of Jesus is given in those spectacular moments of enunciation, birth, baptism, and transfiguration that lie beyond the critical reach of the Jesus Seminar.¹⁰ Those events with their enormous generative power can no more be decoded than the burning bush can be extinguished by Moses. In these events, the God of all hope gives Jesus the authority to anticipate and to create a future that is not available apart from the coming rule of Jesus.

The mission of God—namely the restoration of viable life in creation—is of course *the mission of Jesus*. Jesus’ ministry makes clear that the rescue and rehabilitation of creation is not done in one huge salvific act; it is rather done leper-by-leper, widow-by-widow, and neighbor-by-neighbor:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7:22-23)

Jesus' life consists in *teaching* and *action* that makes the mission of God effective and the future of God visible.¹¹ These enactments are not done by some safe, dismembered, heavenly being, but only by costly, bodily contact with real people in the real world. Thus in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, Jesus perceived that "power had gone forth from him" in a *body-to-body transaction* concerning this fleshly work of God (Mark 5:30). The claim made for Jesus by the early church is very large, and indeed becomes even larger when the tale is recast by the church into creedal abstract language. But the tale told that sustains creedal claims is a tale of neighborliness, the vision of heaven brought down to earth in concrete cases.

IV.

Of course the servant is not above the master (Matt. 10:24). What Jesus enacts the church after him must repeatedly enact. Not for nothing is the story of the early church presented as *Acts*, "deeds," embodied, risky actions implementing the mission under the aegis of God's promise. The encounter of Acts 3:1-10 exhibits the early church replicating the transformative power of the Jesus in the world toward the neighbor. Peter and John are clearly "hoppers," hoping that what they know in Easter and Pentecost is the world's future, perhaps cosmically but certainly for this lone beggar in front of the temple. Their mission, as the mission of Jesus, is to restore creation in this creature to fullness of being. The mission characteristically is beggar-by-beggar, lame man by lame man, made to walk and leap and praise God (Acts 3:9). They did this! It is their *act*! It is an act of the apostles, of the apostolic church. It is *an act of hope* committed in the wake of Jesus who himself enacted the neighborly alternative of God for the world.

The mission is not dangerous until it gets to specific acts. And then, we are told, only a chapter later:

...the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed, because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. (Acts 4:11-3)

Think of it; the response is "annoyed," "arrested," "in custody!" All because they had produced restoration, a surge of life that will challenge and override the debilitating status quo.¹² The apostles dare proclaim...and they dare enact!¹³ The outcome is this man "walking and leaping and praising God," calling into question the shut-down of a world without hope.¹⁴ The authorities seek to keep the lid on hope with all of the official, legitimated gravitas of despair. They will, however, never stop "the force," no more than could pharaoh.

V.

Lent is a demanding time for pastors. It is demanding, of course, because of time and work pressures. More than that, it is demanding because in its narrative of emancipation and wilderness enroute to newness, *the church contradicts the world*:

It asserts *hope*, because God has made promises;

It asserts *mission*, because God has devolved the vision to human agents;

It *acts* to rehabilitate the neighbor, precisely when the fashion of this age is to reduce, deprive, and make the neighbor invisible.

Lent is for contradictions that we ourselves can scarcely tolerate, for it renders the conventional unbearable and the inscrutable palpable and nearly commonplace. Such a bodily enactment, body-to-body, contradicts all the *consumerism* that substitutes “virtual” for the bodily and all the *new ageism* that seeks to escape the bodily into “higher matters.” We should expect resistance to Lent, as Moses resisted. Indeed, we ourselves resist, too good to be true, too hard to be embraced, too bodily to be religious. The God of the self-assertive “I” transposes all of God’s own purposes into a missional “you.” We will resist the mandate for a while, but probably not finally. Before the “I” of YHWH, our resistance is at best penultimate action.

Notes

¹The transposition of the *mission of God* into the *mission of God’s people*, a dominant theme in what follows, will alert us to the issue of “synergism,” the risky thought that the obedient people of God may “help” God. I suspect that our conventional ways of putting this issue are at fault, for the reality of “synergism” is inescapable in the theme, even if the objectionable label may be avoided. Consideration might especially be given to the strange poetic parallelism of Judges 5:11:

...there they repeat the triumphs of the Lord,
the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel.

The poem is not worried, in the parallelism, to claim the victory for both YHWH and the peasants. Our theme invites such thinking that can perhaps only be done in caring poetic parallelism.

²See Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 713-17.

³On the generative power of the Exodus narrative for a powerful continuing trajectory of revolution, see Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁴David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 55-61.

⁵On this text, see the important study of Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15* (SBL Dissertation Series 136; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

⁶In both Ex. 3:21 and Deuteronomy 15:13, the term is “empty” (*riq*). The same usage, as Daube has noted, is surely intentional.

⁷See also Exodus 11:2; 12:35-36.

⁸These steady, daily, bodily, intentional neighbor acts might properly be termed “habits” in the sense that Robert Bellah et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) have made central to the current discussion. These sorts of habits are more readily understood and appreciated when we consider the “habits” of consumerism that television ads seek to engender. Indeed, these *neighbor habits* are an alternative to and an act of resistance against the dominant *habits of consumerism* in our society.

⁹N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) has nicely shown the important ways in which Jesus reenacts the story of ancient Israel.

¹⁰These several spectacular episodes that shape the gospel narrative are not unlike the narrative of the burning bush in marking the narrative by epiphanies that defy our explanations. They provide the driving energy, in both cases, for the concrete narratives that follow.

¹¹It surely is the case that teaching is an action that, when done effectively, has transformative potential. See Thomas F. Green, *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

¹²Parallel to the way in which the apostles could override the status quo, Moses’ action in the Exodus is the same sort of act, albeit more spectacular and generative for what follows after him. The essential work of the act in the two cases is closely paralleled. The way in which healing characteristically evokes resistance in the gospel narrative is worth noting, no doubt arising because the adversaries of Jesus, like Pharaoh, had “hard hearts” (see Mark 2:6-7; 3:5).

¹³Proclamation, like teaching, is an act. As every totalitarian regime knows, utterance is the most

dangerous threat to the maintenance of a monopoly of power. Both teaching and proclamation are acts of defiance against the silence upon which oppressive monopoly depends.

The “new man” made possible in this narrative by the dangerous subversion of the apostles is deeply reminiscent of the dancing and singing of Miriam and the women in Ex. 15:20-21. These eruptions of joyous freedom are an enactment of new possibility that, both in this narrative and in the Exodus narrative, the status quo intended to prohibit.