

WITH WILLING HANDS

Not long ago I was given a delightful book of cartoons drawn by Cuyler Black. It's titled *What's That Funny Look on Your Faith*. Its panel cartoons take a slightly off center look at various Bible stories.

Quite a few of them poke fun at the story of Moses and the Israelites in the Wilderness.

One shows the crossing of the Red Sea. The waters, a la Cecile B. DeMille, are mounded up on the left and the right as the Israelites make their way through. On one side, a man is caught in the jaws of a shark poking its head out of the wall of water. Moses, looking at the man, says, "I told you to stay away from the sides!"

Another one of the cartoons depicts Moses coming down the slopes of Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets. At the bottom of the mountain, several of the Israelites are gathered around a barbeque grill, holding hot dogs and burgers.

"What are those?" asks one of the Israelites, pointing at the tablets, "We heard you were bringing us ten condiments."

Black's depictions may be a bit outrageous, not to mention anachronistic, but his take on the Israelites is very consistent with the Biblical record. Over and over again, the Book of Exodus portrays the wanderers as thickheaded, disobedient, impatient, unfaithful and full of complaints. It is not a pretty picture.

But our passage today, is an exception to all that. A dramatic exception. It is part of the story of the building of the tabernacle, an elaborate and portable house of worship. It is, in fact, a huge tent, but one made of the finest fabrics, and beautifully appointed with precious metals like silver and gold. And it is furnished with incense holders and an altar, made of the most exquisite stone and wood.

The plans for it are said, in Exodus, to have come directly from God. The instructions are very explicit. Use this material for that wall. Make the whole thing a certain size. There is even an instruction to make eleven curtains out of goat hair. Not ten or twelve, but exactly eleven. Not wool or linen—but goat hair.

Our passage, however, comes before the construction phase. It tells of what amounts to a capital campaign. Moses gathers the Israelites together, lays out the plans, and then tells them that they are to take up an offering to underwrite the whole project.

Now the well-informed reader might wonder how these folks will respond. After all, more often than not, they have been told to do one thing, and then done another. More often than not they have forgotten that God freed them from slavery in Egypt and is leading them to the Promised Land. Instead of feeling grateful, they have often been caught up in grumblings and complaints. “Where are we going Moses? How come we don’t have food or water? How do we know you are really speaking with God?”

Anyone who’s read through Exodus to this point would make the assumption that the Israelites will, at best, laugh at Moses, and, at worst, openly rebel.

But that’s not what happens. . Instead, after leaving Moses’ town meeting, they come back bringing all manner of gifts and promises of help. “... [T]hey came,” says the text, “everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord’s offering to be used for the tent . . . .” (35:21)

The offering was made, says the texts, with *willing hearts*. Whereas once they had been willful, always insisting on their own way, now the Israelites suddenly become willing. They make an offering well beyond their normal giving.

But why? Why the change of heart?

Our passage doesn’t explicitly answer that question, but we can make a fair inference from what is said. We can reasonably assume that over time they have come to realize just how amazing God’s liberating actions have been. Scholar Walter Bruggeman sums it up well: “The picture presented [in this passage] is [of] a community so convinced of its covenantal affirmations and so taken up in its conviction of the truth of its liberation narrative that it acts completely beyond the usual calculations of prudence and caution.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, I:961)

In other words, the Israelites come to recognize just how much God had done for them and in response, with great willingness, they give their offerings for the tabernacle.

What I really like about this story is the fact that although God commands that the offering be made, it is not coerced. The Israelites, as always, are free to respond, or not. And when they do give, it is because they want to give. When they do come forward with their gifts and their skills, they do so willingly. They do so with willing hearts.

The tabernacle will require much. There will be many goods and materials needed to build it, as well as many different skills, and the Israelites respond. As Bruggeman writes: “The contributors, include men and women, leaders and people, and each gives at [his or her] point of personal strength, those who have goods and those who have skills.” (Ibid)

And, in time, because of their willingness, a beautiful house of worship rises out of the desert wilderness, one specially built to meet their needs as a wandering people.

Today after this service, we will gather to hear the presentation made by the folks we've asked to explore our renovation needs, and we will make a decision about our own house of worship. We will determine whether or not to proceed with a capital campaign.

In some ways we are at a disadvantage. Unlike the Israelites we've not been directly told by the Holy One that this is what we need to do. And with all due respect, our plans were designed by architect Jack Franzen, not God. And while Moses may have felt secure in telling the Israelites that they absolutely had to do it, after all God commanded it, I am not so inclined. I think we should do it, but I will not claim to speak for God!

But, being a good Congregationalist, I do believe that God works and speak through the assembled people. And this proposal is built on the expressed needs of the congregation. And as we meet this noon, we will be about God's business. And, if we are willing to open our hearts and minds to God we will be guided in the way we should go.

There are two or three other things we can learn from the Israelites. First we should remember how much God has done for us, as individuals and as a congregation. We should ask ourselves if this project, intended to make our building a greater tool for our own life together, and our outreach, is a way we can respond to God's generosity.

Second, we need to recognize that God's desire is clear: whatever we choose to do, God wants us to do it willingly, not begrudgingly.

Third, as with the building of the tabernacle, so with this project. If it is to succeed, we will each need to give at our point of personal strength, both in terms of our financial resources, and in terms of our skills, our time and our talents.

One more cartoon from Black's collection. At the top one reads "Jesus in a dilemma." The picture itself shows the back of the Savior's head, and he is looking at his wrist, where there is a bracelet which says "What Would I Do?"

This noon, as we seek to make our decisions about the capital campaign and the renovation project, let us remember we are going about God's business. Let us remember we live, like those ancient Israelites, in covenant. And let us ask ourselves, "What would God have us do?" And then, whatever we decide, let us do it with willing hearts.

Amen

John H. Danner

