

OUT INTO ARABIA
2nd in a Series on “Spiritual Leadership”
January 9, 2011 – Galatians 1: 11-24
The Church of the Covenant

The Apostle Paul after his “Damascus Road Experience” goes OUT INTO ARABIA for three years in order to figure out what it means. He explodes forth from the desert three years later as a man transformed – he is a man of God; he has a distinct ministry; he has a distinct message. Spiritual Leadership always entails times of quiet reflection, of going out into Arabia, of taking stock and assessing what God wants and of connecting to the source of our power in ministry. –Who wants to be a spiritual leader for the Lord Jesus Christ?????Then go OUT INTO ARABIA...

Many years ago I became enamored with the writing of Thomas Merton, a modern, Catholic mystic, and inspired by him went to the New Melloray Abbey in Iowa for a time of quiet, personal retreat. The earliest worship service was at 3:30 AM in the morning –I’m committed but not that committed! At one point in time I took a tour of the private “brothers’ side” of the monastery –I think I could take the straw-filled mattress ticking but the one thing I couldn’t take was that you had to be silent at meals. Silence over a meal –for me that would be a sacrifice too great to endure! I’d get kicked out in a week! I was sitting at a table having a little spiritual moment when Brother Gus (actually Brother Augustine) came over and said, “God sees you as you truly are” (and instantly I felt entirely convicted and like a sinner) but then after a dramatic pause Brother Gus added, “And God sees you as being far more beautiful than you could ever hope or imagine!” Wow! That blew me away. So I’m sitting there feeling all wonderful and spiritual and another brother comes up and says to me –“Brother Gus says that to ALL the visitors!”

Spiritual leadership is forged initially in isolation and in a deserted place. West Point sends its plebes out into a solitary retreat in order to contemplate what it means to be a leader. Jesus went out into the wilderness and there was tempted by the devil and in the process of silence, and through temptation He knew that He was called to bear the cross. The Apostle Paul is struck blind on the Damascus Road, he has been persecuting the Christians of the early church, he consented in the stoning death of the first Christian martyr, the saintly Stephen. We can almost see him smugly standing with his arms folded as the angry crowd takes up stones and takes the life of early leader of the church, Stephen. Paul, then named Saul, thought he was doing the right thing, thought he was defending the traditions of Israel against this so called “plague” infesting the Promised Land called “The Way”. Saul, soon to be Paul, was the brightest student educated by the finest Jewish Rabbi of his age, Gamaliel. He was brilliant. He was convinced of his absolute rightness. He had absolute rectitude. He was a zealot for God whose zealotry lead him to persecute the early church and kill its leaders. He was a “Pharisee of the Pharisee” as he called himself; perfectly, he thought, obedient to the law; strict in his legalism; demanding of himself; perfectionistic to his core. But there on the Damascus Road he is struck down. He is going to persecute more Christians in Damascus when he is struck blind and he hears a voice; it is the voice of Jesus saying: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9: 4) He thought he SAW; but he must have realized how blind he truly was. We are never as blind as when we think we see perfectly. He thought he was 100% right; he was right to kill people with whom he disagreed. We are never as wrong as when we think we are perfectly right. He thought he was being perfectly obedient to God and to the law, a “Pharisee of the Pharisees”. We never are farther from God than when we think we are completely good and do not need a Savior. This voice of Jesus and being blinded when he thought he could see, then sends this Pharisee out into the desert for three years to figure out what happened to him and what all this means.

He says in our scripture reading, “...but I went away into Arabia...” (*Galatians 1: 17*) And there for three years he thought and prayed and was silent in the desert.

I find it interesting and ironic that seminary education is three years in length. We get called into ministry and then must spend three years trying to figure out what it means. And I will not comment on the similarities with seminary and going out into a wilderness and desert!

But when the Apostle Paul returns from the wilderness he virtually explodes on the scene of the early church. He now is a man of God transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He has been called by Jesus to a new work and a new task. This is clearly not his own idea; his own ideas led him to persecute the church; God’s idea was for him to become “The Apostle to the Gentiles”, the one who travels all over the Gentile world proclaiming the Lordship and the salvation of Jesus Christ. The Pharisee of Pharisees through Jesus is transformed into the Apostle to the Gentiles. We, as Gentiles, are here today because of that one man, the Apostle Paul. So God calls him and God gives him a mission; ah, but then God also gives Paul a message. He becomes the preacher of grace, not law; he preaches the significance of Jesus and Jesus’ message as salvation by grace through faith. You see, spiritual leadership always entails a PERSON, with a MISSION, with a MESSAGE. Who are you, spiritual leader? What is your mission? What is your message? The Apostle Paul when he emerged from the desert was a man, with a mission and armed with a message, called and empowered by Jesus Christ. Spiritual leadership is understanding that...our calling and our mission and our message all come from God...

Henry and Richard Blackaby define spiritual leadership as leaders whose task is to *get people onto God’s agenda and off their own agendas*. How can you do that if you do not listen for God’s voice? Spending time alone with Jesus in prayer? Going out into Arabia? Paul’s agenda was persecuting the church; God’s agenda was for Paul to preach grace to the Gentiles and to be a leader in the church. So Paul returns, first, to Damascus, to the scene of his calling on the Damascus Road and then goes to Jerusalem where he goes to speak with the leaders of the Christian Church, the very people against whom he had been “*breathing threats and murder*”. Imagine the first time the elders in Jerusalem met with this man, now called Paul, not Saul, this man who had killed their best friend, Stephen. They said of him: “*He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he sought to destroy.*” (*Galatians 1: 23*) Isn’t God wild????? God turned Paul’s life UPSIDE DOWN! Isn’t it amazing what God can do in someone’s life? Isn’t it astounding what God can do in our life when we step forward and say, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you; I will follow your leading; I will be a spiritual leader in the life of your church.”

So how do you figure out what your mission and your message is, O spiritual leader? Well, just like the Apostle Paul God has called you FROM something and has called you INTO something else. There is the story of your life. There is the thing perhaps you were doing wrong and God has called you out of that. Just like the Apostle, perhaps there was some issue that became transformed in your life and in that transformation you have your best hint of what your message and mission is to be. Or perhaps it is a circumstance in your life; you grapple with sickness so God gives you a ministry of healing. You struggle with a certain brokenness and so God gives you a ministry of wholeness. You’ve been through a messy divorce so God empowers you to speak into other people’s lives in a way that leads to people being restored. You grapple with greed and money issues so God puts you on the stewardship committee. Out of your personal story, out of your personal brokenness God heals you and transforms you (you have your own little personal Damascus Road experience) and then out of that you begin to understand why God has called you to be an elder, or a deacon, or a pastor, or a leader in the life of the church. Going out into Arabia means struggling to understand what God has gifted you with in terms of your own personal sense of calling, and then from that we begin to discern what is our mission (what we are

to do) and what is our message (what we are to say). Paul understood his message and his mission when he understood that God had called him out of his Phariseism and legalism and into a message and ministry of grace. Spiritual Leadership is never just being the chair of some board meeting, never just sitting on some committee or taskgroup, never just doing things the way the world does things. No, spiritual leadership is discerning Jesus' call and claim over your life, the things where you have been healed and made whole by the Spirit of the Living God, and then out from those desert and wilderness places exploding with a mission and a message given to you by the grace and mercy of the Almighty.

For me, personally, it was out of a profound sense of brokenness and of feeling somehow I never measured up, that God could somehow never love nor accept me, that God entered into my life and restored and healed me through His love and mercy and grace. That's why Brother Gus's message to me so long ago so resonated with my heart. The Apostle Paul went out into Arabia and there he discovered that God loved him *when he was imperfect* and that his ministry was to tell the world as the Apostle to the Gentiles his message -----*of the grace and mercy of God, of the Good News of the Gospel in Jesus Christ.*

You know, it is a message we really do need to hear. As Brother Gus said to me so long ago --"God sees us as we truly are" (and that's a little frightening)... "But God sees us, transformed in Jesus Christ, as far more beautiful than we could ever hope or imagine."

Go OUT INTO ARABIA...hear God's voice speaking to your heart...and discover your calling and your ministry and your message. Because in the church of Jesus Christ *everyone* is a spiritual leader for HIM!

Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*