

CHAPTER THREE

Salvation as Adventure

The Gospels make wonderfully clear that the disciples had not the foggiest idea of what they had gotten into when they followed Jesus. With a simple "Follow me," Jesus invited ordinary people to come out and be part of an adventure, a journey that kept surprising them at every turn in the road. It is no coincidence that the Gospel writers chose to frame the gospel in terms of a journey: "And then Jesus went to," "From there he took his disciples to," "From that time he began to teach them that . . ."

The church exists today as resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief. As a society of unbelief, Western culture is devoid of a sense of journey, of adventure, because it lacks belief in much more than the cultivation of an ever-shrinking horizon of self-preservation and self-expression.

Our current situation is made all the more tragic when one compares the societies produced by the liberalism of the Enlightenment with the high-sounding rhetoric in which they were born. "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." These words from the *Declaration of Independence* remind us of the great sense of

adventure that accompanied the creation of our society. The liberal adventure was the creation of a world of *freedom*. By labeling certain principles as naturally "self-evident," by offering equality and rights, the Enlightenment hoped to produce people who were free. Detached from oppressive claims of tradition and community, holding the significance of their lives within themselves as an individual, natural right, being given the independence to fashion their own future, they were to become free.

It was an adventure that held the seeds of its own destruction within itself, within its attenuated definition of human nature and its inadequate vision of human destiny. What we got was not self-freedom but self-centeredness, loneliness, superficiality, and harried consumerism. Free is not how many of our citizens feel—with our overstocked medicine cabinets, burglar alarms, vast ghettos, and drug culture. Eighteen hundred New Yorkers are murdered every year by their fellow citizens in a city whose police department is larger than the standing army of many nations. The adventure went sour.

There was a time when unbelief also appeared to be adventuresome, when the denial of God was experienced as an exciting new possibility, a heroic refusal to participate in oppressive social convention. In our day, unbelief is the socially acceptable way of living in the West. It no longer takes courage to disbelieve. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted (in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1969], p. 24), we Christians have given atheists less and less in which to disbelieve! A flaccid church has robbed atheism of its earlier pretensions of adventure.

The Good News, which we explore here, is that the success of godlessness and the failure of political liberalism have made possible a recovery of Christianity

as *an adventurous journey*. Life in the colony is not a settled affair. Subject to constant attacks upon and sedition against its most cherished virtues, always in danger of losing its young, regarded as a threat by an atheistic culture, which in the name of freedom and equality subjugates everyone—the Christian colony can be appreciated by its members as a challenge.

Here we become uneasy with our image of the church as colony. To be a colony implies that God's people settle in, stake out a claim, build fences, and guard their turf. Of course, in a hostile world, a world simplistic enough not to believe but sophisticated enough to make its attacks on belief in the most subtle of ways, there is reason for the colony to be *en garde*. Yet when the church stakes out a claim, this implies that we are somehow satisfied with our little corner of the world, our little cultivated garden of spirituality or introspection, or whatever crumbs are left after the wider society has used reason, science, politics, or whatever other dominant means it has of making sense of itself.

Our biblical story demands an offensive rather than defensive posture of the church. The world and all its resources, anguish, gifts, and groaning is God's world, and God demands what God has created. Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world's settled arrangements. In the Christ, God refuses to "stay in his place." The message that sustains the colony is not for itself but for the whole world—the colony having significance only as God's means for saving the whole world. The colony is God's means of a major offensive against the world, for the world.

An army succeeds, not through trench warfare but through movement, penetration, tactics. Therefore, to speak of the church as a colony is to speak of the colony not as a place, a fortified position, be it theological or geographical. The colony is a people on the move, like

Jesus' first disciples, breathlessly trying to keep up with Jesus. It is an adventure with many unknowns, internal arguments over which turn to take in the road, conversations along the way, visits to strange places, introductions and farewells, and much looking back and taking stock.

When we are baptized, we (like the first disciples) jump on a moving train. As disciples, we do not so much accept a creed, or come to a clear sense of self-understanding by which we know this or that with utter certitude. We become part of a journey that began long before we got here and shall continue long after we are gone. Too often, we have conceived of salvation—what God does to us in Jesus—as a purely personal decision, or a matter of finally getting our heads straight on basic beliefs, or of having some inner feelings of righteousness about ourselves and God, or of having our social attitudes readjusted. In this chapter we argue that salvation is not so much a new beginning but rather a beginning in the middle, so to speak. Faith begins, not in discovery, but in remembrance. The story began without us, as a story of the peculiar way God is redeeming the world, a story that invites us to come forth and be saved by sharing in the work of a new people whom God has created in Israel and Jesus. Such movement saves us by (1) placing us within an adventure that is nothing less than God's purpose for the whole world, and (2) communally training us to fashion our lives in accordance with what is true rather than what is false.

A pastor baptized a baby. After the baptism the pastor said to the baby, in a voice loud enough to be heard by parents and congregation, "Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we

cannot say. This we do know and this we say—God is with you.”

Perhaps Paul characterized this journey begun at baptism even better when he characterized the way as nothing less than a way from death to life:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:5-11)

On the Road Again

The Bible is fundamentally a story of a people's journey with God. Scripture is an account of human existence as told by God. In scripture, we see that God is taking the disconnected elements of our lives and pulling them together into a coherent story that means something. When we lack such a truthful, coherent account, life is likely to be perceived as disconnected, ad hoc. In trying to make sense of life, when we lack a coherent narrative, life is little more than a lurch to the left, a lurch to the right. This is the world seen through the eyes of the “CBS Evening News”: disaster here, insoluble problem there, and then the inevitable “now this” followed by a commercial that helps us recover our sense that our world is all right (Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [New York: Penguin Books, 1986]). No wonder modern

humanity, even as it loudly proclaims its freedom and power to choose, is really an impotent herd driven this way and that, paralyzed by the disconnectedness of it all. It's just one damn thing after another.

How does God deal with human fear, confusion, and paralysis? God tells a story: I am none other than the God who “brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Deut. 5:6). Knowing that story makes sense out of the following command that Israel “shall have no other gods before me.” The Bible does not argue that idolatry detracts from human self-esteem, or that life is better when lived without idols. Indeed, idolatry is a creative response on the part of a finite creature that has not heard about the Creator. Idolatry is condemned only on the basis of a story we know about God.

Israel is a people who learn this story by heart and gather regularly to retell it.

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers. (Deut. 6:21-23)

In telling that story, Israel comes to see itself as a people on a journey, an adventure. Its ethics become the virtues necessary to sustain Israel on the road. Our contention is that it does not just happen that God's people tell stories; certainly, the penchant for storytelling has nothing to do with Matthew, Mark, and Luke being primitive, prerational people who told simple stories, whereas we are sophisticated people who do not. Story is the fundamental means of talking about and listening to

God, the only human means available to us that is complex and engaging enough to make comprehensible what it means to be with God.

Early Christians, interestingly, began not with creedal speculation about the metaphysics of the Incarnation—that is, Christology abstracted from the Gospel accounts. They began with stories about Jesus, about those whose lives got caught up in his life. Therefore, in a more sophisticated and engaging way, by the very form of their presentation, the Gospel writers were able to begin training us to situate our lives like his life. We cannot know Jesus without following Jesus. Engagement with Jesus, as the misconceptions of his first disciples show, is necessary to understand Jesus. In a sense, we follow Jesus *before* we know Jesus. Furthermore, we know Jesus before we know ourselves. For how can we know the truth of ourselves as sinful and misunderstanding, but redeemed and empowered without our first being shown, as it was shown to his first disciples?

By telling these stories, we come to see the significance and coherence of our lives as a gift, as something not of our own heroic creation, but as something that must be told to us, something we would not have known without the community of faith. The little story I call my life is given cosmic, eternal significance as it is caught up within God's larger account of history. "We were Pharaoh's slaves . . . , the Lord brought us out . . . that he might preserve us." The significance of our lives is frighteningly contingent on the story of another. Christians are those who hear this story and are able to tell it as our salvation.