

A VISION AND A TASK

They say that all GREAT people have 2 birthdays -- the day they were BORN and the day they discover WHY they were born. A few weeks ago, we read about the BAPTISM of Jesus, and how WHEN He came up out of the water, God's VOICE came from the heavens, saying: *THIS is my SON, the BELOVED, on whom my FAVOR rests.* Well friends, I believe that it was on THAT day that Jesus discovered WHY He was BORN. THAT day was His SECOND birthday. And IF you read the biographies of MANY great people, you'll notice that they OFTEN have a SECOND birthday, a SPECIAL day, when they discovered WHY they were BORN.

For example: my all-time FAVORITE singer-songwriter was Harry CHAPIN. And, just before Harry was DIED in that tragic AUTO accident on the *Long Island Expressway*, he completed the MUSIC for an Off-Broadway MUSICAL entitled, *COTTON PATCH GOSPEL*. It's play, BASED on a RE-WRITE of the gospels by Clarence Jordan. And IN the *Cotton Patch Gospels*, Jordan takes the story of Jesus, and makes it CONTEMPORARY by setting it in modern-day GEORGIA. And the MUSICAL version is a WONDERFUL, upbeat, life-giving show that offers a TERRIFIC and really FUN portrayal of JESUS. In fact, I'd LOVE to have us consider DOING that musical HERE sometime. Well, Harry Chapin is not usually REMEMBERED for *Cotton Patch Gospel*. Instead, he's remembered for his STORY songs like *Cats in the Cradle* and *Taxi*, AND for his TIRELESS work to alleviate world HUNGER. I mean: Harry could have been a WEALTHY man, but he drove an OLD Volkswagon and gave MOST of his MONEY to fight world HUNGER. I saw him in concert MANY times, and he ALWAYS included a SERMON about HUNGER. He also CHAIRED President Carter's *COMMISSION on World Hunger* and received a posthumous *Congressional Medal of HONOR* for his good WORK on the issue. But do you know what? Shortly after Harry FINISHED writing *Cotton Patch Gospel*, and JUST before he died, he TOLD his family (and this came right out of the mouth of his brother, Tom Chapin) that it was NOT composing pop songs or fighting world hunger, but composing the music for *Cotton Patch Gospel* that was the reason WHY he was BORN. Yes, GREAT people have 2 birthdays: the day they are BORN and the day they discover WHY.

Now, as I said, JESUS' second birthday came at His BAPTISM. THAT'S the day He realized WHAT His life was to be about. THAT'S the day He caught God's VISION of what He is to LIVE for, and ultimately DIE for. SO, after His Baptism, Jesus BEGINS His ministry! He starts preaching and teaching, healing and proclaiming God's KINGDOM. He goes all OVER the Holy Land talking about God and God's VALUES. I mean: suddenly He's a MAN on a MISSION, because He knows WHY He was BORN -- and therefore, WHAT He is LIVING for, and will ultimately DIE for.

Nelson Mandela in South Africa was ANOTHER one. You'd THINK that, after being in prison for so long, he'd just settle down and stay OUT of the limelight when he was finally FREED. But NOT Mandela! The MINUTE he was FREED he was back out there, LEADING the battle against Apartheid, more VOCAL and COMMITTED than ever. And THAT showed ME his GREATNESS. Nelson Mandela DESERVED to become South Africa's PRESIDENT. Well, I don't KNOW this, but I suspect that, somewhere along the line, Mandela had a SECOND birthday.

But don't you WONDER about people like Nelson Mandela? Do you ever wonder if they have moments of DOUBT, confusion, and uncertainty? Well, they MUST have such moments, moments when they're just not SURE about their CALLING, or their VISION, or their MISSION. In fact, I believe that even JESUS had such MOMENTS! And I REALIZE that WHAT I'm about to

SAY to you is my OWN interpretation of scripture, but I think it's a FAIR interpretation. I think that JESUS had moments of doubt and questioning, moments when He NEEDED reassurance, moments when He prayed HARD to RECONNECT with His FATHER, as HE called God. For example, there was that TIME, just prior to our Scripture Lesson today, when Jesus wondered HOW He was doing. So He asked His disciples: *WHO do people say that I AM?* THEN, He asked them: *And YOU, who do YOU say that I am?* And Peter TOLD Him: *I know WHO you ARE! YOU are the CHRIST! YOU are the MESSIAH! YOU are the SON of the LIVING God!* But even though He MUST have been doing WELL on His mission, because Peter correctly IDENTIFIES Him, apparently it isn't ENOUGH. Jesus needs MORE than HUMAN approval. Jesus needs DIVINE approval!

And THAT'S why Jesus climbs Mount Hermon and PRAYS until He GLISTENS with sweat, until His burning Spirit SHINEE right through His BODY, until He is TRANSFIXED on God like a MOTH on a LIGHTBULB, until He is TRANSFIGURED! Yes, He goes UP that mountain and prays SO hard because He NEEDS to know that He is ON the right TRACK, and that GOD is well-PLEASED with Him. After all: Jesus KNOWS that the ROAD He is ON will lead to a CROSS. And therefore, Jesus HAS to be SURE that He's on the RIGHT road! NO one wants their DEATH to be in VAIN, not even JESUS. As the POET wrote: *the GREATEST treason is to do the RIGHT thing for the WRONG reason.* Yes, Jesus NEEDS to KNOW! And SO, He anguishes in PRAYER and WAITS for God to REASSURE Him.

Now, DURING this mysterious PRAYER time, TWO people interrupt Him, but not just ANY people. They are MOSES, the great LAW-GIVER, and ELIJAH, the great PROPHET. And they are NOT just an INTERRUPTION. They are actually PART of the PROCESS of His PRAYER. As you know, the PURPOSE of prayer is NOT to stare *wide-eyed and happy-hearted* at God, but to BEND our lives to GOD'S peculiar PATTERNS, and to CATCH God's VISION for our lives, AND to be empowered to FULFILL God's vision.

Well, Jesus KNOWS that God WANTS Him to FULFILL the LAW and the PROPHETS, to FULFILL all that has gone before! Well, IS He being TRUE to that call? After all, He is constantly being ACCUSED of playing a little FAST and LOOSE with the Law of Moses. Without changing a single LETTER, He has REWRITTEN the entire LAW in a completely new SPIRIT. But, IS He being faithful? LIKEWISE, Jesus KNOWS that He is SUPPOSED to be the GREATEST of the prophets. But, He doesn't ACT like other prophets. He doesn't RAIL against injustice and THREATEN people with the wrath of GOD! He is a FRIEND of SINNERS! What kind of prophet is THAT? HOW can He be on the RIGHT track by traveling COUNTER to all the TRADITIONS? Yes, THESE are the issues Jesus must be AGONIZING over on that MOUNTAIN.

And in the PROCESS of prayer, Jesus is AFFIRMED! It's as IF Moses is ASSURING Him that He has NOT destroyed the LAW, but correctly INTERPRETED it for a new AGE. And it's as IF Elijah is ASSURING Him that, through the eyes of a SON, He has PERFECTLY captured God's WILL, God's INTENTION, God's VISION, and faithfully PROCLAIMED it. And THEN, of course, we come to the CLIMAX of the story, as God CONFIRMS the judgement of MOSES and ELIJAH and from the CLOUD says: *THIS is my SON, the BELOVED. LISTEN to Him!*

And SO, on the mountain of Transfiguration, in the presence of His inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John; and in an experience of PRAYER that is more MYSTERIOUS than any other event in His LIFE -- except His resurrection -- Jesus is REASSURED by God. His SECOND birthday is CONFIRMED! And He's told that He IS, indeed, on the RIGHT track, doing the RIGHT thing. And SO, He NOW is able to turn His face toward JERUSALEM and His inevitable DEATH.

Now certainly, WE do not walk toward OUR death on the SAME level as JESUS walks toward HIS. But we ALL walk that way nonetheless. And AS we walk, we cannot HELP but to ASK ourselves WHY we are HERE, WHY we were BORN in the first place. And we may NOT be able to point to a SECOND birthday, or ONE specific purpose, like Harry Chapin or Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa. But MANY of us are HERE today because we FEEL like we have FOUND here the ANSWER to our question, or at least PART of the ANSWER.

Of course, MANY people are ALSO here today because it's part of their SEARCH, because they're HOPING to find the ANSWER here. And IF that's the case for YOU, KNOW that SOME of us COME here because we HAVE found here the answer that we're searching for. We've realized WHY we were BORN, and THAT'S what BRINGS us here. We've REALIZED, for example, that for US, Christ is the WAY, the TRUTH and the LIFE. We've ALSO realized that GOD is inviting US to help build of a KINGDOM where LOVE, peace and HARMONY (with GOD, with NATURE and with ALL people everywhere) will become a way of LIFE. Yes, THAT'S why we are HERE! We're HERE because we've HEARD the good NEWS of Jesus Christ and RECEIVED God's VISION, and made it OUR mission. And the CHURCH is God's gift to TEACH us, to GUIDE us, to FOCUS us and to EMPOWER us to ACCOMPLISH our mission. Yes, we are HERE, because we understand WHY we were BORN! WE have a VISION AND a TASK! And as my teacher and mentor, Henri Nouwen, once said: *A vision without a task is a DREAM; a task without a vision is DRUDGERY; but a vision AND a task is the HOPE of the world.* And THAT is our only REAL hope, isn't it?

But sometimes, we TOO need a little REASSURANCE, just as JESUS did. Sometime we TOO need to be reassured that we are ON the right TRACK, and being FAITHFUL to our mission. And THAT'S why I WONDER whether this TRANSFIGURATION experience might, in some SMALL way, apply to US as well? Of course, WE will never GLOW! And I don't expect to HEAR God's VOICE coming out of a CLOUD! But MAYBE, we have LITTLE transfiguration experiences, LITTLE ways that God TELLS us that we're on the right track. MAYBE they come to us in JOYFUL moments when we feel LOVED for who we are, UNDERSTOOD by a listener, or FORGIVEN for some HURT that we've caused. Or MAYBE they come to us in those good feelings we get when we do a good DEED for a struggling neighbor, or FORGIVE someone who has HURT us, or stand by a friend through a life CRISIS. OR, maybe they come to us when we DARE to take a stand for justice, and speak OUT, even if means taking a RISK or seeing LITTLE progress.

For example: our denomination, the United Church of Christ, took LOTS of criticism (for years) for maintaining TIES to some churches in communist East GERMANY, and even financially SUPPORTING them. BUT, WHEN the Berlin Wall came down, and it was realized that PART of the reason WHY, was that those churches had NEVER given up their struggle for FREEDOM, it was SO reassuring to those of us who had VOTED for SUPPORTING those East German churches for ALL those years. It was like a LITTLE moment of transfiguration. The SAME is true when I WORK with a person or family, and SEE their lives begin to CHANGE and grow, or when I see people finding more and more fulfillment, and growing deeper in FAITH, because of their connection with US and our church. The SAME is true when I try to make a change in my personal life, and find that I LIKE myself better and feel more WHOLE, because I've MADE that CHANGE.

Yes, God DOES reassure us along the way with LITTLE transfiguration experiences. We JUST need to WATCH for them. Friends, it's a GREAT feeling to know WHY we were BORN, AND to have a VISION AND a TASK for our lives, AND to be REASSURED along the way! And the CHURCH can help, which is why it's SO important to BE here regularly. But GOD is the GIVER of that GIFT. SO, let's keep on praising and thanking and GLORIFYING God! Amen.