

*Sojourners in the Land*

Independence Sunday

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Sunday, July 5, 2009

by Dr. Frank Trotter

A man was sitting in the waiting area at LAX passing time until his scheduled flight to New York was ready to board. While he was flipping through a magazine, he looked up and happened to notice that there was one of those old fashioned weight machines against the wall that gives you your weight on a small card – along with your fortune. Having nothing else to do, he got up, wandered over to take a look, and thought to himself, “I’ll give it a try and see what it tells me.” He stepped on the scale, put his quarter in, and out came a card that read: “You are a 45-year-old male in pretty good shape, you weigh 200 pounds, you work at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, and you are waiting for your flight to New York.” The man was surprised because everything on the card was correct. Thinking that this had to be a fluke, he got on the machine again and put in another quarter. The second card read: “You are a 45-year-old male in pretty good shape, you weigh 200 pounds, you work at JPL in Pasadena, and you are STILL waiting for your flight to New York.” Well, this completely perplexed the man. Since he worked at JPL and didn’t believe for a second that an airport weight machine could be that on target, he decided that this must be a practical joke with a hidden camera or something. He walked back to the shops and found a place that sold all kinds of gifts to take to loved ones. There were some very expensive gifts but also some toys and gadgets. Lo and behold, he found a mask that looked like Manny Ramirez complete with long black dreadlocks, a Dodgers shirt with #99 on the back, a Dodgers cap, and a pair of flashy sun glasses. He bought all of it, put it on, and pulled the cap down over the face. Swaggering up to the weight machine, he got on, put in a third quarter, and a third card came out which read: “You are a 45-year-old male in pretty good shape, you weigh 200 pounds, and you work at JPL in Pasadena.” The card went on to read: “However, while you were messing around trying to look like Manny Ramirez, you missed your flight to New York!”

It’s all about the journey, isn’t it?

It has been a daunting task to land a robotic device on the surface of Mars. Since the 1960’s, dozens of orbiters, landers, and rovers have been launched

toward Mars by countries such as the United States, the Soviet Union (and later Russia), Japan, the European Space Agency, Australia, and the People's Republic of China. Even though millions and millions of dollars have gone into the projects, it's estimated that fully two-thirds of these international efforts ended in failure – due in part to the “complexity and large number of variables involved in an interplanetary journey, and has led researchers to jokingly speak of *The Great Galactic Ghoul* which subsists on a diet of Mars probes...[also known] as the *Mars Curse*...”<sup>1</sup>

Mariner 9, one of NASA's orbiters that was constructed at JPL here in Pasadena, was the first craft to successfully orbit Mars on November 13, 1971. But two weeks later, the Soviet Union topped that by landing Mars 2 on the surface of the red planet. In the early 1990's, NASA decided to honor the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the robotic exploration of Mars by holding a competition to name the first American rover scheduled to navigate the Mars surface. The Mars Pathfinder would be the lander that transported the rover to the surface, but what name should they give to their robotic explorer?

In March 1994 the Planetary Society of Pasadena, CA, in cooperation with NASA's JPL decided to have a contest to name the explorer. Over the next year, youth from around the world who were no older than 18 were invited to submit suggestions. There were a couple of criteria for the contest: (1) the rover had to be named for a “heroine” – it had to be a “she”; and (2) the youth had to submit an essay that addressed “how a planetary rover named for their heroine would translate [the heroine's historical] accomplishments to the Martian environment.”<sup>2</sup>

The winner out of more than 3,500 entries was submitted by Valerie Ambrose of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who was 12 years old at the time. The name she submitted was Sojourner Truth who was a famous figure in American history. Born Isabella Van Wagener, this African-American woman became a reformer, abolitionist, and champion of women's rights during the Civil War era. Taking the name “Sojourner Truth,” she “made it her mission to ‘travel up and down the land,’ advocating the rights of all

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<sup>1</sup> “Exploration of Mars,” Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploration\\_of\\_Mars](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploration_of_Mars).

<sup>2</sup> “NASA Names First Rover to Explore the Surface of Mars,”  
<http://marsprogram.jpl.nasa.gov/MPF/rover/name.html>.

people to be free and the rights of women to participate fully in society. The name Sojourner was selected because it means ‘traveler’.”<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the Mars Pathfinder landed on Mars on July 4, 1997, a ramp emerged from the lander and a strange looking vehicle weighing about 25 pounds very slowly made its way down to the red dirt. Would it work? Was it worth the time and expense? Within two days, JPL in Pasadena excitedly began releasing a steady stream of news reporters that Sojourner was alive and well and performing as expected!

The word “sojourner”, of course, is an ancient one going back to biblical times. The Hebrew people, from the beginning of their history, called themselves “sojourners in the land” – travelers always on the way to the next place by the good grace of God. When Abram and Sarai left their home in Mesopotamia and followed God’s voice, they knew would always be transients in this world.

The author of Hebrews summarizes Abraham’s life in this way: “By faith, Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith, he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:8-10) When his wife, Sarah dies in old age, Abraham says, “I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a burying place [for her].” (Genesis 23:4)

The key verse reads: “For [Abraham] looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Theologian William Loader says that this passage from Hebrews “is about believing there really is something greater and permanent towards which we are heading and that gives us the confidence to go on.”<sup>4</sup> The temptation is always to settle down and get comfortable, but the journey of faith constantly prods us to look for the horizon and to move toward what God wants us to do there.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. For more information, go to the Sojourner Rover Homepage, <http://marsprogram.jpl.nasa.gov/MPF/rover/sojourner.html>, or to “Rover ‘Holds Hands’ with Barnacle Bill,” July 7, 1997, <http://edition.cnn.com/TECH/9707/07/pathfinder.8a/>.

<sup>4</sup> William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year C *Epistle* Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 11 (Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16),” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpPentecost11.htm>.

Horizons are sometimes geographical, as they were when Abraham and Sarah traveled thousands of miles to their new home. They were certainly geographical for Jesus about whom it was said that foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. But horizons can also be metaphorical. While some of us may live in the same general area for most of our lives, God stretches our imagination of who we are and what we are to be about here, in this place. “Same old/same old” is just not compatible with the faith that the Bible describes.

Yet, God does not send us out without support into a land of shifting horizons. God also gives us “a sense of solidarity with ancient heroes of faith who stuck with confidence to what they believed and remained faithful to it.”<sup>5</sup> What were Abraham and Moses, for example, looking for? The author of Hebrews says “that what Abraham really yearned for (and Moses and all the others as well!) was something they could not articulate for themselves. It was the God given yearning to want to be in the place where God is, in the world of God’s heavenly presence. That is the ultimate hope promised to us. This is a kind of existential interpretation. The author dares to claim that he knows what was really driving them – even if they didn’t know, themselves. Many people have interpreted religious quests in this way, however diverse and strong they have sometimes been. They claim that deep down people have a yearning for God and express it in all kinds of different ways including the motion that they must travel somewhere or be in a particular place.”<sup>6</sup>

This passage is always a challenge for people of faith when they come to times on the calendar like this weekend when we celebrate our nation’s birthday. If it’s true, as someone once said, that holidays and anniversaries are meant to tie us to the land, to encourage us to settle down and put down roots, the scriptures quickly disabuse us of that notion. As important as citizenship in earthly nations is (as it certainly is for us), God is always unsettling our need to get too comfortable. Just when we think we have the best nation in the world, God reminds us that we are to be a witness to the nations, a servant to the world proclaiming justice and righteousness, an advocate for the poor and the least of these. Just when we become comfortable with calling ourselves “Americans,” or “Canadians,” or

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“Russians,” or “Israelis,” God reminds us that we are never truly citizens of this world.

Our passage from Hebrews concludes with the words, “But now [our ancestors in faith] desire a better country, that is a heavenly one: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, and hath prepared for them a city!”

Jewish theologian Martin Buber knew that when he said, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”<sup>7</sup>

Mark Twain knew that when he wrote, “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”<sup>8</sup>

Jack Kerouac, the American poet of the 1950’s beat generation who is known for his poetry of the road knew that. He said, “Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”<sup>9</sup>

The great American novelist Henry Miller also knew that, writing, “If we are always arriving and departing it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.”<sup>10</sup>

One of my favorite poems that is fitting to be read on a day such as this is entitled “Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight” and was written by the American poet, Vachel Lindsay, in 1914.<sup>11</sup> It is about one of our ancestors in faith, himself a sojourner in the land.

It is portentous, and a thing of state  
That here at midnight, in our little town  
A mourning figure walks, and will not rest,  
Near the old court-house pacing up and down.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, <http://www.buber.de/en/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Twain, <http://www.hobotraveler.com/indextravelquotes.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Kerouac, <http://www.hobotraveler.com/indextravelquotes.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Miller, <http://www.henrymiller.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight,” quoted at poemhunter.com – <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/abraham-lincoln-walks-at-midnight/>.

Or by his homestead, or in shadowed yards  
He lingers where his children used to play,  
Or through the market, on the well-worn stones  
He stalks until the dawn-stars burn away.

A bronzed, lank man! His suit of ancient black,  
A famous high top-hat and plain worn shawl  
Make him the quaint great figure that men love,  
The prairie-lawyer, master of us all.

He cannot sleep upon his hillside now.  
He is among us: -- as in times before!  
And we who toss and lie awake for long  
Breathe deep, and start, to see him pass the door.

His head is bowed. He thinks on men and kings.  
Yea, when the sick world cries, how can he sleep?  
Too many peasants fight, they know not why,  
Too many homesteads in black terror weep.

The sins of all the war-lords burn his heart.  
He sees the dreadnaughts scouring every main.  
He carries on his shawl-wrapped shoulders now  
The bitterness, the folly and the pain.

He cannot rest until a spirit-dawn  
Shall come; -- the shining hope of Europe free;  
The league of sober folk, the Workers' Earth,  
Bringing long peace to Cornwall, Alp and Sea.

It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,  
That all his hours of travail here for men  
Seem yet in vain. And who will bring white peace  
That he may sleep upon his hill again?

Today we remember and count the blessings that God has given our nation – and they are many. But more than that, we are also reminded that people of faith are always moving toward the kingdom of God which transcends and encompasses every nation and people on the earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.