

Forces Against Forward

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In Charles Dickens' rich and wonderful novel *Great Expectations* a character emerges early by the name of Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham is a middle-aged spinster recluse living in a large mansion who hardly makes an appearance outside her house. She has an adopted daughter, Estella, for whom Miss Havisham seeks a companion. She is able to arrange for the young man Pip – the protagonist in the story -- to come be her daughter's friend. And what young Pip discovers upon arriving at Satis House, Miss Havisham's dilapidated estate, is that inside the house everything has appeared to stop. All the clocks are stopped at the same time – twenty minutes to nine. Miss Havisham wears the same gown everyday – it is the wedding gown she was wearing the day of her wedding when she received – at twenty minutes to nine – the news that her fiancée was defrauding her and leaving her at the altar. The wedding day breakfast and wedding cake remain on the table uneaten. Nothing in the house has moved since the moment Miss Havisham opened the letter from her fiancée telling her it was over. Literally, the clocks stopped. The moment of her jilting had become the moment of her ceasing to move forward. There was no more moving on.

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It is very much a part of the human condition when each of us, consciously or sub-consciously, come to a point of no more moving on. An example of this I become aware of when I am driving down the road in my car and all the preset stations on my radio are set to the music of thirty years ago. Classic Rock. When some of my favorite classic rock songs come on, I say to myself – boy they just don't write them like that anymore. Of course there has been some good music since then – and

I've been introduced to it by my daughter – but the truth is there came a time when for me and my musical tastes the clock stopped and there was no more moving forward. Truth is I am a nostalgic person. So the old music reminds me of the old days – and because I am nostalgic I want to think that the old days were the good day – the better days. I have this romanticized filter in my brain – and I want to think that maybe if we could somehow make the clocks not just stop, but go back – well then the world might be a better place.

Columnist David Brooks this past week had a corrective for us nostalgics. Brooks reminds us that in many ways the world has gotten better: We are, he says, “living in an era with the greatest reduction in global poverty ever — across Asia and Africa. We're seeing a decline in civil wars and warfare generally. The scope of the problems we face are way below historic averages. We face nothing like the slavery fights of the 1860s, the brutality of child labor and industrialization of the 1880s, or a civilization-threatening crisis like World War I, the Great Depression, World War II or the Cold War. Even next to the 1970s — which witnessed Watergate, stagflation, social decay and rising crime — we are living in a golden age.”

Sometimes it doesn't feel that way, does it? Things change – and somewhere along the way we want the clocks to stop. We don't really want to move on. The past has this seductive way of capturing us.

So maybe we can understand what is taking place for good old Moses who is trying to lead his people out of Egypt. They have been enslaved for centuries. There is not a generation among them that can remember back to when they were free. Slavery is the only life they have ever known. But Moses has this God-implanted vision of freedom. Moses looks ahead to the future and says that maybe the better days lie ahead and not behind. That God has this Promised Land – a land of long ago that the people of Israel once inhabited – and God has this dream of a new time, a new land and a new freedom. But to get there it means pain. To get there Moses has to confront Pharaoh. To get there the Israelite slaves have to build mud bricks without straw. To get there people have to endure plagues. There are these forces against forward. But Moses won't back down. He is

undeterred. And now he has got the people at the edge of the Sea ready for their escape – but they are penned in. Behind them is the advancing Egyptian army in hot pursuit – and before them is the impassable sea. And now comes the time to complain. “Oh boy,” say the boo birds, “so much for things getting better. So much for the Promised Land. So much for freedom.” And they reach for the radio dial to turn it back to the golden oldies station. “Let us alone,” they say, “and let us serve the Egyptians. Let’s go back to the good old days.”

Now as Moses stands at the edge of the sea – this seemingly impassable sea -- what he doesn’t know is that this won’t be the last time the people of Israel complain. It will be a chorus of boos for the next forty years. Every time they come against the forces against forward – it is there first inclination to go backward. When they run out of food, let’s go back to Egypt. When they run out of water, let’s go back to Egypt. When they get to the edge of the Promised Land and spy out a formidable enemy, let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to the good old days.

I’m not sure who said it, but I think it’s true – “A familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.”

Kirk Hall reminds me of that scene in the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, where the old inmate of the prison, a man who had spent most his life there, gets the word that he’s finally served his sentence. He’s free to go. But because the prison is about all he has ever known – he is deathly afraid to leave. He even threatens the life of another inmate just to bargain for his retention. But leave he must. And the prisoner Red who narrates the story says, “I’m telling you, these walls are funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them, enough time passes you get so you depend on them.”

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Don’t you wonder about that when it comes to this journey that Jesus would have us on? Jesus always seems in this tug of war with his people trying to drag them to an unfamiliar freedom. There’s that time when the lawyer comes to Jesus and wants to know about inheriting eternal life. He

wants to know who's in and who's out. He's made a business of building a prison of do's and don'ts – with the good people inside and the bad people outside. Hurdles to jump over, the hoops to jump through, the moral code to obey. And he wants to know if Jesus knows the pass code into the prison of the law. And Jesus says, "I'll do you one better, I'll give you the pass code out of the prison. Love God and love your neighbor." "But who is my neighbor?" asks the lawyer, because he doesn't really like the idea of leaving his prison. And Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. A "bad" person helping a good person. But where are the rules? Where are the walls? the lawyer wonders. Welcome, Jesus says, to the unfamiliar freedom.

And you remember when Peter approached Jesus and asked him about forgiveness. You remember the story. Peter wants to know that statute of limitation when it comes to forgiveness. How many times, Jesus, must I forgive my brother or sister? In other words, how far do I have to move forward before I turn around? When do I get to stop the clock? How many escapes into the unfamiliar freedom of grace, before I can lock myself back up in the prison of righteous indignation? When is enough enough such that I can return to Egypt? Will seven times allow me to go back to jail for good? Oh, Jesus says, once I part the sea – once I invite you into the new life of grace, the promised land of mercy – there's no turning back. Seventy times seven isn't going to be enough.

And you remember the story Jesus told about the rich man all locked up in his house feasting sumptuously everyday and wearing his fine purple linen robes? And he's got this house with a big fence and a big gate. He is all walled in in his splendor. And right outside the gate, Jesus tells us, there is this poor sick man named Lazarus for whom just even a few scraps would be appreciated. But the imprisoned rich man – just can't escape. He can't escape into this unfamiliar freedom. It would be just too upsetting. It would be too risky. It would open him up to a level of cognitive dissonance. The freedom to love and to serve would upset too much the applecart. And the rich man stays inside his prison.

Then there are those good old Pharisees locked inside their Sabbath rules. They are in lockdown. They have it all figured out what you can and what you can't do on the Sabbath day.

And the walls are so high around their comfortable captivity they just can't see the lame man on the mat who just wants a little help. Oh, but what would happen if we step outside the walls. What would happen if we love our neighbor? What would happen if we risked getting our hands dirty? And Jesus says, Try it, you'll like it.

Do you remember that great chapter in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, entitled, *The Grand Inquisitor* – that enacts the scene between the Grand Inquisitor and the returning Christ? And the debate between the Inquisitor and Jesus is on the topic of freedom. And the Inquisitor says to Jesus, "Thou hast made us free and thou respects our freedom, but who told thee we want to be free? We prefer to be slaves, provided we be secure and we enjoy ourselves. Freedom is too onerous a burden to bear ... Thy love for us is misplaced. Thy gift to us is unwanted. Thou hast said, 'Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,' but we say with Pilate, 'What is truth?' And we add, 'Who cares to be free?'"

So life has this crazy way of locking us up, doesn't it? Of getting us a little too comfortable either with the ways things are or the way things used to be. There is something so secure about keeping up the walls. Maybe it's the wall of anger. You have been unjustly treated and it just feels so good to hold onto that pain. That my best way of getting back at you is to wall you out of my life. Or maybe it is a quiet prejudice. That somewhere along the way it felt more comfortable categorizing a certain people and painting them with a broad and condemning brush. Easier to compartmentalize them into some box that says, this is what is wrong with the world. Or maybe its resentment. That somehow you managed to play by all the rules (even though you probably really haven't) and you look around and see how folks want to change the rules or don't want to obey the rules and you kind of resent the fact that it hasn't worked out as well for you as it appears for them. And so the easiest thing to say is that the world is going to hell in a hand basket. Or maybe it is an addiction. Something has a grip on you. And it just feels easier to give in over and over again and not to have to face up to the forces that want to keep me from going forward. The hard work of day in and day out putting your next foot forward.

A dear friend of mine is fond of saying, "People don't change until the fear of changing is less than the fear of staying the same."

Charles Bracelen Flood in his book on the last years of Robert E. Lee reports that the old retired Confederate General paid a visit years after the war to a Kentucky lady who took him to the back of her house and pointed out an old and once stately oak tree that had been damaged and left dead by Union artillery. She pointed to the tree and looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her wounded lament. After a brief silence, Lee turned to the woman and said, "Time to cut it down, dear Madam, and move on."

So the sea seemed wide for those Israelites of long ago. And the approaching armies seemed far too easy to surrender to. The forces against forward always seem too much, don't they? But the God who takes us to these places, the God who would have us confront the stopped clocks, the dead trees, the same old songs, the secure and comfortable walls, is the God who has promised us something even better. An unfamiliar freedom where sinners are forgiven, the unloved are loved, the poor are served, and the lame are made to walk again. Such are the signs of the Promised Land.