

The Fire We Must Light

The young man walked calmly onto the stage of a packed theater last fall. He was dressed nicely and casually. A small headset lent some color but did not distract him or his audience. Quiet warmth was apparent, and it increased as he introduced his topic. The title gave no hint of his message or his passion for it. “In Pursuit of Communal Knowledge” sounded like a dry, academic topic, suitable for a Charlottesville audience. But they were not anticipating a dry topic or dull speaker. This was a TED talk, and Peter Johnson was there to describe his passion.

Peter detailed his love of exploring caves. Not just any caves, already well known and frequented by cave hobbyists. Peter and a small group of colleagues explore the unexplored, caves where few if any human beings have gone, hundreds of feet below the ground. Staying in deep, unknown space for days at a time, Peter and his team map uncharted space, slipping through crevices, dangling from ropes, enduring cold and damp conditions to accomplish their mission. They go there to map the unknown.

Why does Peter do it? The passion is evident in his talk, and people who have barely heard of Peter or his work surely are struck by his commitment to taking such risks. As he explains, in part it is to explore the unknown. In part, he wants to deepen knowledge gathering through teamwork, thus calling this the pursuit of communal knowledge. A sense of bond has to emerge, or their lives are in great jeopardy. They must work together, and they must do so with a shared passion. In spite of his quiet warmth, Peter obviously has this passion, and minimizes his own contribution to the task. But why, the audience surely wonders? Why does he do it? What gives him such drive to risk and to explore?

I wish I knew, and I feel I should have known, a long time ago. Twenty years ago, when Peter was the shy acolyte in a Connecticut Episcopal church where I served as rector. Outside his

family, Peter could seem preoccupied, distracted, at times even withdrawn. He ate little, other than pasta. It could be difficult to get his attention. Clearly he had a good mind and a great heart. It seemed something was percolating inside him. But who knew? Who could have guessed that such passion to explore and to risk and to work together would blossom so well? How did such a fascinating young adult emerge from the uncertain teenager of a few years ago? Even more, what could his church have done to sense his gifts and to encourage him?

He has done very well. But are there things we might learn, for the uncertain kids, and for ourselves, all of us struggling to find a focus. I believe there is passion hidden within all of us. There is goodness and there is potential. But how can it crystallize and be used, for the good of us all? How can we as Christians encourage the fires of passion that will make our world better? What do we bring as people of faith?

We get a clue from today's Old Testament lesson. In search of ancient Israel's next king, the prophet Samuel is led by God to the house of Jesse. None of Jesse's sons seems suitable, until the youngest son, who has been overlooked, is recalled. That young son, named David, has been tending the sheep. As the youngest, it would be easy to overlook him. When he enters, Samuel senses the potential, the greatness, and the passion that awaits unlocking. Led by God to ask, to explore, to seek, Samuel identifies David. He becomes king.

Of course it is not quite that simple. Samuel is not acting on his own volition, nor his own vision. His eyes must be awakened by God, to see what is in front of him. David is not obviously passionate about being king, until he enters the role. Then, as king, he falters in alarming ways. But there is no denying the main message: Samuel begins to see that God will work in the world through the life of David. And David, in spite of his flaws, rises to genuine faith and profound leadership. Ultimately David will grieve his sins, look more deeply for God, and remain true to

the potential with which he has been blessed. His passion becomes clear, and through him a great people secures its place as a nation.

The theme of passion that is unlocked by vision is prominent throughout the Bible. The ancient prophets, such as Samuel, could see what was happening, see possibility in situations and in people. David was overlooked, until Samuel grasped God's vision and saw what could be, ignoring assumptions about youngest sons. We need that kind of vision now, in ourselves, for the sake of our world. It is vision that is willing to see the world in fresh terms, to shed prejudices and expectations. We need to look beneath the surface of each other, to explore our lives as carefully as explorers enter unknown caves. We must dare to look with open eyes, to ask the right questions, to imagine, to invite, to encourage. Something precious is at work as Samuel becomes aware of David, and as Peter enters remote caves. Few of us can do what Peter does, or Samuel did, but we can open our eyes, we can ask, we can explore. Then we can tap, within ourselves and others, possibilities that lie dormant. All of us carry passions deep within us, passions that can be evoked to draw us closer together and make us whole.

It is not an easy topic, even for people of faith. There is plenty of passion in our world, and we don't need to look hard to find it. But much of the world's passion today is unfocused frustration and even an impulse to destroy. Just having passion is not good enough. It must be passion born of faith in God, passion embodied by the life of Christ. Instead, many people are angry and fearful. We feel we have been neglected or wronged. We are divided by politics, religion, race, social class. We huddle in like-minded clusters where disagreement is a capital offense. Conspiracy theories are rife. Criticism has become more urgent than creativity. This is not the passion that faith taps. This is not what will build us up. Our frustrations may be genuine, but they will only divide us further, not foster the cooperation we require. Instead, let's consider

what Samuel, and Peter, might teach us, lest we will sink further into alienation. We will never grasp the passion we and our world need until we find God-given vision.

Even without lingering over the daily news, we easily become discouraged. We are well aware of people whose lives are in disarray, people who are confused, who have made misstep after misstep. We wonder sadly how we ever lost touch, became divided, stopped speaking the same language. We have seen lives drift along, unfocused. And we have felt ourselves slipping and losing control. Each of us bears passion that has gone unrequited. Each of us can speak of unmet hopes, bitter lessons learned. It is tempting to slide further, thinking no further possibility awaits us, nothing better will arise. So we struggle, hoping there is more, but fearing nothing new can surface. But God is at work. God calls us to deeper places where new worlds await. We can find the God-given vision we need. We need not be lost. We can move ahead.

But what sort of vision is this? What will faith in God open our eyes to find? Our problem is our tendency to see only life's surface, not to look beneath, at deeper and greater reality. Our lessons today, beginning with the story of Samuel and David, describe a struggle to see what lies within, the passion waiting to be unlocked and expressed. If there is a message in the story that we must hear and apply to our own lives, it is the message that there is more to life than what lies on the surface. The vision we require is vision that sees within, and not simply without. Like people who explore caves, we must realize that what lies beneath the surface will be entirely different from what we assume is there. Explorers such as Peter recall turning on lights far beneath the surface, and seeing dazzling chambers, filled with rock formations, often in varied colors, some with rings recording years of water's dripping. Who would know, unless someone dared to look, unless we went exploring. Fresh explorations, to find our own lives and to find each other, must begin.

Who could imagine what possibility lies in a person's life unless someone dared to look, took time to explore, to wonder, and see. It's not just a challenge in understanding the physical world. Even if we know each other's names, and easily stop to speak, you and I are mysteries to each other. We form our impressions based on appearances, some of which may be appealing, some of which may be misleading. But all remain incomplete unless we dare to venture beneath the surfaces of our lives. There we find passions and possibilities waiting to be tapped for the good of us all. We are more than we assume, more than even we imagine, for God is at work in us, and in our world. The vision we require is more than acknowledging life's surface, which can easily distract. We must see God at work in the world and join our lives to that work; then we can bring about healing and make our lives whole, together.

This exploration of the spiritual and moral landscape is not an easy project. The late Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset observed that our search for goodness is like a journey through an immense landscape, an exploration through which we advance slowly. But we need not lose heart. For Jesus said that the kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground. We sleep and rise night and day, and the seed grows, and we do not know how. As Christians, what we are about, is that daily tending of the garden, scattering seed, watering, and waiting. It does not always work well, and there are times when we must begin again. At times we even despair. But we have good seed and good soil within reach. We need only begin, with one step at a time.

When astronaut Neal Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, he said: "one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." From small steps, across unfamiliar terrain, giant advances can unfold. Similarly, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds that produces a large plant, in which birds can find shelter. Like the potential in someone's

life, we cannot always know where it comes from, or exactly how to unlock it. Some days things go well; at other times we feel at a loss to know what to do. But here is the point: we stick with it. Day after day, we take small steps. Day after day, with thoughtful attention to one another, we look for the passion, the deep sorts of possibility within each of us. At all times, in all seasons of life, the fires still burn within our souls. We know we care, we know that we have convictions. Your passion and my passion come from God; the fires of God's presence. We have much to contribute, much to give to one another. But we are like unexplored territory, awaiting discovery. By faith, we can take the risk, dare to look beneath the surface, take small steps and keep at it. Then our souls advance, and we build the sort of teamwork with one another that will sustain us through the roughest of times. Let the journey of a lifetime begin. God is with us.

Amen.

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