



## **“The Far Side”**

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Hayward, California***

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Exodus 3:1–15 (NRSV)***

What comes to mind when you think of “the far side?”

Many in my generation think of syndicated cartoonist Gary Larson who created the comic strip *The Far Side*. Perhaps you know it. *The Far Side* ran in many major U.S. newspapers from 1980 to 1995. One of our major regional newspapers in the Bay Area features reruns of *The Far Side* every day.

*The Far Side* cartoon became popular when I was in college. Several of my friends are still fans. I’m not the aficionado that some are, but I have a couple of favorite cartoons that are memorable, and that I’ll share with you.

One of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons depicts two cows sitting in a serene living room. One cow is sitting on a couch and the other is sitting in a chair. The phone is ringing, and one cow says to the other, “And here we sit without opposable thumbs.”

Another of my favorites depicts two characters. One is peeping out the window of their cave, and the other has its arms wrapped around a desktop computer. One character says to the other, “Quick, put away the computer. The anthropologists are coming.”

Wikipedia describes Gary Larson’s *Far Side* series as: “. . . surrealistic humor based on uncomfortable social situations, improbable events, an anthropomorphic view of the world, logical fallacies, impending bizarre disasters, or the search for the meaning of life.”<sup>1</sup>

In retrospect, Wikipedia’s description of Larson’s cartoons not only describes the series, it could also serve as a progressive theological analysis of today’s Old Testament reading from Exodus 3, “the call of Moses.”

Imagine being Moses and living on “the far side,”—“the far side of Midian” as some translations put it. Imagine being Moses, a herder of his father-in-law’s sheep,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Far\\_Side](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Far_Side)

seeing a burning bush, and hearing the voice of God calling his name.” Moses, Moses!” and Moses saying, “Here, I am.”

Imagine the *Far Side* comic strip—depicting uncomfortable social situations, improbable events . . . logical fallacies . . . [and] the meaning of life.” Imagine the far side.

Are we talking about Midian, the comic strip, or both?

Maybe both.

## II

“Where is Midian?” you may ask.

I wasn’t entirely sure. I had to look it up.

Midian is located on the northwest side of the Arabian Peninsula, along the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba. (The Gulf of Aqaba lies to the west of the Arabian Peninsula, and the Sinai Peninsula lies to the west of the Gulf.)

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, “There is not much there, there.” Midian was and is arid desert.

The people who inhabited Midian (the Midianites) were an ancient tribal people descended from Abraham and his concubine, Keturah. The Midianites were nomadic shepherders who did not have firm geographic boundaries or leave much physical evidence behind, such as permanent buildings, to document their presence.

As the story goes, in Exodus 2, Moses killed an Egyptian soldier in an effort to protect a slave from brutal and unjust punishment. Moses feared Pharaoh’s reprisal, so he fled to Midian, where he encountered Jethro’s daughters watering their father’s herds at his well. (Jethro was the high priest of Midian, the ruler of his people.)

Jethro’s daughters led Moses home to meet their father, who, took Jethro into his tribe and gave him his daughter, Zipporah, in marriage. Moses and Zipporah spent the early years of their marriage in Midian, where Moses tended his father-in-law’s sheep and goats.

It was while Moses was herding livestock on the far side of Midian that he received his call to lead the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt. At first, when he gets the call, Moses thinks God has the wrong number. “Who are you?” he asks.

“I am Yahweh, the God of your ancestors,” God explains. “I have a job for you. Go to Pharaoh and tell him, ‘Let my people go.’”

“Um,” Moses replies, “I think you have the wrong guy. Look at my resume. I don’t have any job-related experience. I don’t even have the aptitude for public speaking, much less leading liberation movements.”

God is unimpressed. God tells Moses that Aaron will be sent along with him to serve as his speech writer.

Moses is slow to warm to the idea. He says, “My GPS is broken, and I’m terrible with directions.”

God says, “No worries. I’ll be your guide.”

Reluctantly, Moses accepts God’s call, and by doing so he launches one of the most important liberation movements that the world has ever known.

### III

I wonder, have you ever been to the far side of Midian? Not the long-lost, physical and geographical Midian that archeologists have searched for, but the metaphorical Midian?

Have you ever been to a place that you had hoped would be a refuge, but where you wondered, “What in God’s name am I doing here?” Have you ever been to a place that turned out to be faraway, and filled with peculiar events and circumstances that you weren’t sure how to interpret or respond to? Have you ever felt called—maybe even cursed—into taking on a challenge that you thought was far beyond your capability or imagining?

Gwen Colegrove, a member of the congregation that I served in New York, once described to me her “far side” experience. She told me that when she was about 50 years old, she was serving as a UCC missionary in the Philippines, teaching English to fisherpeople in a remote island village in the archipelago.

One weekend, while she was at home in the small cottage that she rented, Gwen was approached by some villagers and asked to go with them to help a woman whose infant in a neighboring village was very sick.

I don’t know the exact diagnosis of the child’s sickness. It could have been any number of diarrheal diseases which were (and are) rampant in impoverished communities. What’s important about the story is that whatever was wrong with the child was serious. The baby’s life was threatened.

Even though Gwen was a teacher, and not a nurse, the villagers summoned her for help, because they knew that she was educated, and that she had relationships and

resources that extended beyond their village, and that if anyone in the village could save the baby, she was likely the only one with the capacity to do so.

Gwen then went to visit the family and see if she could help. When she arrived at the baby's home, and laid eyes on him, she could see that he was malnourished and lethargic from dehydration.

So she hired a driver to take her to a pharmacy in the closest city, where she purchased some aural rehydration fluid, clean water, and canned baby formula. She brought the supplies back to the village, and showed the baby's mother how to prepare the rehydration fluid and the baby formula. And then she returned to her cottage and her weekend routine.

Early the next day, which was Sunday, Gwen heard a knock at the door. She went to the door and opened it, and discovered that the baby for whom she had provided the milk was wrapped in a blanket and lying in a basket on her stoop. No one else was around as far as she could see.

Gwen spent the next two weeks biding her time between caring for the baby, searching for his birth mother, and trying to teach her classes. After an exhaustive search, no one could find the baby's mother, or even a clue as to her whereabouts. It was clear to Gwen that there was no extended family in the village, and no one else in the village was in a position to feed and care for another child. So she made arrangements to care for him in her cottage.

Eventually the time came when Gwen's missionary assignment came to an end, and she was expected to return to the U.S. She then had to choose between bringing the baby home with her or finding an orphanage that would accept him. She opted to apply for adoption and citizenship for the baby, whom Stephanie and I came to know as Teddy Colegrove.

(Teddy is amazing. He was a little boy with lots of energy and a need for focus, when we left New York. He is now a grown man, and a college graduate. I reconnected with him this summer through Facebook, and learned that he is the owner of a successful IT company in Pennsylvania.)

In reflecting on the early days that she and Teddy were together, recounted how she, like many first-time parents, was clueless about what to do with a baby. She was over 50, had never been a mother, and hadn't planned on becoming one either. She didn't even have a job or a home to go to back in the U.S.

As an unlikely parent, Gwen was living on the far side of Midian. She was living in a faraway place, filled with peculiar events and circumstances that she wasn't sure how to interpret or respond to. Gwen, like Moses, received a call to a vocation that she felt unprepared to embrace, but she embraced it anyway.

#### IV

I wonder, “Have you spent time on the far side of Midian? Are you living on the far side right now? Are you looking for refuge, but feeling called to take on a challenge that you may not feel completely prepared to accept?”

If so, you are in good company. Moses faced a similar predicament. He felt unprepared to lead a liberation movement. He knew a thousand reasons why God should pick someone else, and he tried to get out of the job. But God persisted. God challenged Moses to claim his calling, to trust in divine guidance, and to share the yoke of leadership with his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam.

So what’s the message in Moses’ story or Gwen’s story, for us? What’s the word from the far side?

The word is this: God calls ordinary people like you and me to do extraordinary things—not because we are so capable—but because God has plans for us and plans for the healing and liberation of those who are aching for compassion and justice in our world.

The question, then, is not whether we have been to the proverbial far side of Midian, or whether we feel equipped to embrace the calling to which God has called us. The question is whether our response to God’s call is affirmative or not. Amen.