

The Call

For those of us of a certain age, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of great personal searching.

The questions asked during those decades weren't only about civil rights and the Vietnam war, they were also about who am I, who am I supposed to be, what am I supposed to do?

When you spend time with the Bible, you realize pretty quickly that those are the same questions that the Bible seems to be asking through the lives of so many, over the course of thousands of years.

The beautiful thing about our Jewish fathers and mothers is that they spent a great deal of time examining themselves, probing themselves, even judging themselves.

Asking the deep questions, and facing the often unflattering truth about who I am is something you can't miss when you spend some time with the Bible.

We often think of the Bible as the Holy Book, and it is that.

And yet, most of us need to change what we think when we use the word "Holy."

Lots of folks understand the word "holy" to mean pious and good and safe and religious and loyal and all kinds of other qualities that we name as virtues.

But to be holy in the sense that the Bible points to holiness is really much more complicated than that.

To be holy really means getting into the muck and mud of our human existence.

It means taking a good look not only our faithfulness but at our our faithlessness.

Looking closely not only at the times that we are pious and good, but at the times we have dirty mouths and hopeless hearts.

In short, the holy isn't limited to purity and light and spotlessness; but it is also found in the very struggles that we encounter every day of our lives: with ourselves, with each other, and yes, even with God.

And at the end of the day, what we slowly come to discover, is that we are holy not because of what we do for God, but because of what God does for us.

And that brings us to this fantastic story of Jonah.

You know the story: God assigns Jonah the task of traveling to Vegas, or maybe it's Ninevah, to warn the folks there to mend their ways.

Jonah objects: "kill the filthy pagans!," he mutters.

God insists, Jonah runs away (where can you run from God, you might wonder?), ends up tossed off a ship, into the belly of a large fish, burped up on shore, reluctantly does what he's told, and remains thoroughly bent out of shape until the very end of the story.

Now, it's no coincidence that old Jonah ends up in the belly of the whale.

The kind of saving that God does, the kind of changing that God wrings out of us, most often comes from the inside out.

Which is why Jonah gets barfed up, inside out, by a whale on the edge of a faraway beach — the insides come belching out, and there sits Jonah, amidst the half digested fish and clumps of seaweed: a man who desperately needs to change.

And yet, the story of Jonah is the story of a fellow who just won't change.

It's the story of a fellow who's so sure that he's right about how he sees the world that no matter the miracles that unfold before his eyes, like an entire city of pagans repenting and turning to God after hearing the very worst sermon ever preached ("In 40 Days, Ninevah will be overthrown!"), like being rescued at sea by the most unlikely lifeguard named Moby Dick, and even in the miracle of a small plant sprouting up to shade him from the hot sun at just the right time, none of these things are enough for poor old Jonah.

He sits and he stew, upset at the graciousness of God.

And there the story ends, with God standing over Jonah, poking at his ribs, saying, "Come on man!

Hundreds of thousands of people's lives are saved — and we even saved the cows!

Lighten up!"

I can be like Jonah.

Fixated on my way of doing things, stuck with a world-view that only looks out into a very narrow field of vision, insisting that God do things my way, rather than me bending to try things out God's ways.

So when we ask those crucial questions: who am I; why and for what am I here — by their very nature these questions ask us to take a look deep inside: at where we've been, what the source of our hurts and pains are, what in our past has caused parts of who we are to become small or stunted?

These of course are some of the hardest questions to ask in life.

They dredge up old pains, they tear off scabs we had hoped were healed.

But indeed, if we don't face ourselves, our ability to discover the answers to life's most important questions begins to fade away.

These questions aren't just for us as individuals to ask.

They are questions to pose to the larger society, of which we are all a part.

For many in my generation and the generation before us, the most frightening book about where we were headed was George Orwell's 1984.

Was the future going to be ruled by Big Brother?

Would fear and pain and misery be our destiny, with an all powerful government watching our every move?

But at the same time Orwell's book was hitting it big, there was another book, by Aldous Huxley, called Brave New World, which seems to have gotten what actually has happened pretty right.

Rather than the iron fist and peering eyes of Big Brother, the haunting message of Brave New World is that we will happily surrender our quest to discover who we are and what we are called to become, for entertainment.

That's not hard to miss today, what with movies on demand, iphones at the ready, music of any kind instantly available, earphones to silence the crowds, and don't forget all of the mood changing drugs, alcohol, and sleep aids that come to the rescue!

Whether it's the NFL or Talk Radio, we pay obscene amounts of money to people who will, with their bodies or their mouths, keep us entertained.

Some of the biggest churches are all about loud music, video displays and popcorn -- over there -- at the candy stand.

All of which is fine, I suppose, until and unless we forget why we are here; if we forget that life is not simply a matter of getting from birth to death with the least amount of inconvenience and boredom; but that we are each and every one of us here in this life with a task to perform, a duty to meet, a mission to fulfill.

"The Master said, 'There is one thing in this world that must never be forgotten.

If you were to forget everything else, but did not forget that, then there would be no cause to worry; whereas if you performed and remembered and did not forget every single thing but forgot that one thing, then you would have done nothing whatsoever.

It is just as if a King had sent you out into a country to carry out a specified task.

You go and perform a hundred other tasks, but if you have not performed that particular task on account of which you had gone to that country, it is as though you had performed nothing at all.

So each person has come into this world for a particular task, and that is each person's purpose; if it is not performed, then she will have done nothing." Rumi

What is your task?

What is the one thing you are here to do?

"As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

What is your task?

What is the one thing you are here to do?

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