

The Wake Up Call

Isaiah 6: 1-8

John 3: 1-17

In the late 80s, PBS created hours of video with Bill Moyers interviewing Professor Joseph Campbell, a brilliant lifelong student of comparative religions and literature. Campbell would die during the production of the video; he was in his 80s. He would never know the huge success of the video series entitled “The Power of Myth.” Although he had published many acclaimed works, like “The Hero with Thousand Faces,” the video on PBS was seen by millions, re-released in 2002, and remains a classic. It was also testimony to the excellent production work that turned the many hours of interviews into a visual masterpiece.

The expression “find your bliss” was popularized by Joseph Campbell in this video, expressing the union of life’s activity with its sacred purpose. In the video, Campbell would describe the elements of a master story, showing how they formed basic themes of human existence, personal struggle, the quest for meaning in life, and the promise before each life.

Campbell saw the greatest fault in human existence as “the sin of inadvertence, of not being alert, not quite awake.” Campbell said, “The hero’s journey always begins with the call. One way or another, a guide must come to say, ‘Look, you’re in sleepy land. Wake! Come on a trip. There is a whole aspect of your consciousness, your being, that’s not been touched. So, you’re at home here? Well, there’s not enough of you there.’ And so, it starts.”

Of course, the hero’s journey in story is an apt reflection of the personal journey of one’s life. But Campbell reflects that it is a journey that requires a certain spirituality to be met. The life unconsidered, which follows a pattern, which adheres to a discipline of routine, which strives for stability and security, is precisely the life that believes in little more than what’s before you. This is life; my recliner, my remote control, my beer, my dog. It is presumably a very satisfying rut, but it missing growth, depth, and most of life’s greater meaning. It is summed up by the dash between birth year and death year in that nothing much happened in-between those dates that would be worth recording; a dash is sufficient for the life unconsidered.

In today’s scriptures, we have the wake-up call coming to God’s servants. They have been drifting along in sleepy land, living common lives without any undue cares or concerns. This is going to change abruptly and the chapter for a sacred adventure opens to them.

For Isaiah, we have this passage of his calling coming rather late, in chapter 6. It suggests that Isaiah had visions and messages from God, being taught in effect how God was frustrated and disappointed in his chosen people. In those earlier chapters, God shares with Isaiah his frustration at the futility of his people’s worship, their sacrifices, incense burning, prayers, special holidays and Sabbath observances. God found them a waste of time and effort, fraudulent covers from a faithless people who otherwise

disregard God's law and will, condoning injustice, and sponsoring idolatry. It could easily be said that God's people have made their routine of worship into a matter of occasional piety, a self-satisfying spirituality that imposes no undue expectations and maintains a veneer of dutiful propriety without requiring sacrifice, submission, confession, or commitment.

God's problem is how to wake them up, or shake them up. They're sleep walking through their lives, thinking they're doing just what needs to be done. They can do it with their eyes closed, and that's the problem! They need to be awakened to the truth of God's spirituality, spiritual power, and the promise of new life. In a real sense, this is awakening to faith, pure and simple. To have faith, one must envision beyond what's seen and tangible, and reach for what is beyond knowledge with the confidence that there is a promise awaiting fulfillment.

For this special kind of mission, God comes to Isaiah in a new way. In chapter 6, most commentators read the clues in the text to indicate that Isaiah is in the Jerusalem Temple. We might assume that Isaiah is there for worship on a regular basis, and this is just another occasion of coming before the Lord in his own acts of faithful piety. On this day, Isaiah has a dramatic vision of God on a throne, the train of his robe filling the Temple, and six-winged seraphs in attendance. This is not like the messages which Isaiah had received before. This was BIG, surely beyond Isaiah's experience, and this really had his attention.

The theophany (\$5 word for divine appearance, for God becoming present) starts rolling as the seraphim – literally fiery celestial beings – begin calling or singing to each thunderously: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.* This doxology, song of divine praise, of the heavenly choir begins with "holy" and ends with "glory." It is a call to worship and adoration of God.

This earth-shaking, overwhelming display seems to reduce Isaiah to a blubbing mass of jello. *Woe to me! I'm ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips....* The seraph acts on this confession of sinfulness and flies to Isaiah bearing a hot coal from the altar in tongs. This can't have helped the feeling that he was in a bad predicament; a seraph is flying toward you with a live coal.

The seraph touches his lips and declares, *See, this has touched your lips and your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.* By this gracious act of God, the guilt, the verdict against him, is thrown out and dismissed completely. The actions to bring redress and recompense, the penalty and restitution, have similarly been graciously satisfied, paid-in-full. The confession of sin is followed by the assurance of God's pardon and forgiveness. This is the opening of every one of our Sunday services; call to worship, confession, and pardon.

We can imagine Isaiah is still quite awed by the whole thing, but he has also had first-hand experience of the burden of his sinfulness as he stood before God, having full knowledge of his sinfulness, and then experiencing the blessing of gracious forgiveness.

But we aren't finished here yet. God has a purpose beyond the engagement of the worship ritual. Remember, the seraphs have been singing, and the seraph announced the forgiveness. Now we have God's first words in this scene. *Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?* Isaiah, beneficiary of this awesome display of divine grandeur and incredible grace, hearts this question and immediately answers: *Here am I. Send me!*

God has accomplished two things, having awakened his servant Isaiah and recruiting him for a (thankless) mission to God's people, who in turn will seek to awaken God's people in Judah.

Isaiah was sure that he was inadequate for anything, a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips. He had earlier heard God's pronouncements against his own people, and Isaiah realized that he was one of those people, a sinner like all the rest. But by God's gracious healing, Isaiah is made new, ready to respond eagerly to God's call to serve in this challenging mission field. Isaiah had no qualifications, no experience, and no obvious gifts. But he did know God and had experienced God's gracious blessing. His witness would be perfect, and his renewed spirit made him a willing servant.

The notion of a wake-up call seems to have been what roused the member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus, to take the unusual step of coming out at night to where Jesus was staying. It would seem that Nicodemus had heard of Jesus' miracles, and perhaps had heard Jesus' teaching firsthand in the Temple. (Remember, in John's gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem and clears the Temple market in the *beginning* of the gospel, not at the end as in the synoptic gospels.)

The dialogue should be familiar. Nicodemus shows a knack for saying the obvious, giving him a rather dim-witted aura. He begins by saying: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these miraculous signs that you do if God were not with him.*

Jesus replies to him each time by answering the question which Nicodemus **should** have asked, but didn't. It makes the dialogue rather disjointed. Jesus speaks about the need to be born again, followed by Nicodemus feebly grappling with how a person can *be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb.* Like I said, Nicodemus seems like a rather low wattage bulb.

After talking then about the water and the Spirit, Jesus says, *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'* Jesus then speaks about the wind blowing and being born of the Spirit. Unsurprisingly, it seems like Nicodemus is quite confused (and you may be confused, too).

Jesus expresses his dismay that a learned leader of the Jews cannot follow along and understand. In fact, Nicodemus is bravely trying, although he seems to be foundering right now. Something about Jesus and his teaching has awakened Nicodemus to some of the flaws and contradictions of **his** assumptions about faithfulness to God. Jesus' teaching and ministry has shaken him to question his own spirituality and self-regard as a faithful servant of God. And finally, as an influential

leader himself, Jesus' portrayal of the kingdom of God stands in marked contrast to the worldly ways of earthly kingdoms and powers to which Nicodemus has a loyal leader. Coming to Jesus in the dark, we ought to hope that Nicodemus leaves with the light of the Holy Spirit and the good news of Jesus in his mouth.

The end of today's passage is the familiar John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life* – but it is coupled with the completely unknown John 3:17: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*. It is a key part of the wake-up call for Nicodemus, and even for us. The memorable phrase in verse 16 is that *God so loved the world*, love being the singular expression of the most precious gift to be given. But there are so many who have a deep and abiding faith in a God of judgment and condemnation, and that's why verse 17 is all about God's agenda not to condemn, but to save and bring new life. The aim is to awaken the world to God's love in Jesus and have people embrace love as the priority sacred value.

That need to be awakened, to begin the journey with Jesus in a mission of love, grace, and salvation remains the gospel mission for all Christians today. Joseph Campbell called it the hero's journey, but he also recognized that it is the journey for every person. It is journey that requires faith, faith in oneself, and moreover, faith in the power of God to work through you. The journey which Campbell outlined includes self-disqualification, a rejection of the mission, and a desire to substitute it with something preferable. The one who calls us to this mission does not accept our preferences, but wants the mission fulfilled, knowing the trials and dangers and ordeals involved.

This is the mission for which we receive a wake-up call with the coming of the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit's empowerment, we are to be awakened and made new for the mission of love, justice, and peace in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord and Savior.