

Perhaps we are on a journey of small paths that weave in and out as we become healers and helpers along the way to each other at any given time. This is what I have come to understand from reading Joseph Campbell, whose model of “the Hero’s Journey” has been very helpful to me.

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It is the story of our journey through life, and what happens to us there.

Sometimes on the Hero’s Journey, the hero doesn’t make it all the way, and someone else has to finish. Moses cannot reach the Promised Land, and Aaron has to carry on. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn’t live to see what would happen to his dream, but we are inspired by his life every time we sing, “We Shall Overcome.” Bonhoeffer met his end two months before the liberation, but his influence is still strong. The Gospel of Mark has so many parallels to “The Odyssey,” you can see at many turns how Jesus’ journey is told in terms that would be familiar to a Greek audience that knew Odysseus.

We listen to these stories, and there is something we recognize: we too are on a journey that takes some of the same turns. The journey goes like this: The hero is born for a purpose. The hero is called to an adventure by some external voice. The hero seeks out a protective figure that gives him advice for the journey. The hero must go through an ordeal. The hero must be tested, and an ability to stand up to the test must be discerned. The hero finds helpers along the way. The hero goes through a critical moment and either comes through or, like Moses, does not. The hero finds and takes the elixir that will make him/her whole, and must find a way back home, and this is often dangerous. The hero crosses the threshold of home through an awakening or rebirth. And finally, the hero now has the tool, the elixir that brings new powers to help humankind.¹

These twists and turns occur in every great story of adventure. In some way and in some form, they resonate with our own journeys as well.

I think that so many people find themselves going to their churches on Sunday thinking that they are going to get directions to a shortened or painless path instead of learning how to just *be* on the journey, one that changes with each new chapter of our lives. The shortcut approach is what Bonhoeffer would call, “cheap grace.” There may be no way to escape the pains that come with life, but there are ways of living through and with them.

There is something interesting in today’s scripture that I hadn’t seen before. The word has gone out that Jesus is healing people. More and more people want something from him. The disciples are rushing everywhere to find him, and Simon Peter says, “Jesus, everyone is looking for you!” Jesus says, “Let us go somewhere else.” Here is the surprise: Jesus did not feel that he had to respond to every need.

Jesus is the only one in this passage who knows what he can and cannot give. He is the one who has taken the time to go off in the midst of all of the demands upon his time and energy to simply...pray. Jesus has a spiritual discipline, and what Jesus did was to keep himself focused on his work, not let others define his goal, and to stay grounded and connected.

Frank Lloyd Wright remembered an incident that had a profound influence on the rest of his life. The winter he was nine, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his stuffy uncle. As they reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. He pointed out his own straight tracks in the snow, and then at young Frank’s tracks, which meandered all over the field. His uncle

said, “Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again, and see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that.”

Years later, the world-famous architect liked to tell how the experience had contributed to his philosophy in life. He said, “I determined right then and there, not to miss the things in life that my uncle had missed.”

Frank Lloyd Wright saw in those tracks what his uncle could not: It is easy to let the demands of life keep us from the joys of living.

We recognize that any goal in life worth achieving demands a great deal of our energy. We couldn't live if we didn't set goals and worked to fulfill them. But here's what Wright discovered at a young age: The objective in life is not the goal but the journey on the way to the goal.

How do you enjoy the journey when everyone and everything in your life is searching for you, wanting a piece of you, or demanding your time?

A writer of spiritual fiction talked about being on a retreat at a monastery. She watched a young monk sit under a tree quietly for a long time. Later, she said to him, “I saw you today sitting beneath the tree—just sitting there so still. How is it that you can wait so patiently in the moment? I can't seem to get used to the idea of doing nothing.”

She said that he broke into a wonderful grin and said, “Well, there's the problem right there, young lady. You've bought into the cultural myth that when you're waiting, you are doing nothing.” Then he took his hands and placed them on her shoulders and said, “I hope you'll hear this all the way down to your toes. When you're waiting, you're not doing 'nothing.' You're doing the most important thing there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up. If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be.”²

I get re-filled by spending time doing what might be considered very little at all. On Thursday night the rains came pouring down and I was alone. I thought of many things I should be accomplishing, and set about trying to do them, but finally chose to spend the night in a big leather chair by the fireplace watching the rain fall outside the windows. By the time I went to bed, I felt clearheaded and centered.

I don't know how you do it, but I am always trying to make room for my own patchwork of spiritual, physical and emotional disciplines in the attempt to allow my whole instrument to work together so that I feel that I am fully responding. For me, it is just as important that I do this as anything else. Perhaps in so doing, I can be one of the helpers on the journey, or be helped—I might bring back the elixir of the hero's journey and give it away freely, and can cross the threshold of home and know rest.

Irenaeus, one of the first and greatest theologians of the western church, said: “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” I hope that part of being here on Sunday for you is that piece of the journey where you are striving to feel fully alive—healing and feeling healed. Helping and being helped along the way.

In one way or another, you find, or at least try to find, ways to step away from the demands that are placed upon you. When Jesus was a healing presence that day in the house of Simon and Andrew, his healing was tremendous. But so was his knowledge that the work was heavy, and so he relied on his spiritual discipline that let him be focused on his work, not let others define his goal, and to stay grounded and connected.

The gospel says that Jesus cast out demons. Although today we have new terms of understanding for the human psyche that don't require us to personify illnesses of society and of the mind and soul in so lively a way as we see in the pages of the gospels, in a sense, not much has changed. All of us come here seeking higher meaning.

† We are looking to break free of the demons of loneliness.

† We want to cast out those images of what the world asks us to be, which possess us in how we think we fall short in how we see ourselves and our own potential.

† We want to be healed of other restraints on our physical and emotional and spiritual wholeness.

† Some of us are seeking to be rid of the societal demons of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, or whatever ism or phobia it is that either elevates us to false seats of privilege or denigrates us into places that make us question our own worth.

We have come here because we need to be lifted up, and we have heard that healing has taken place here. And like the woman that Jesus came to heal, when we have felt that healing touch, we too can get up and serve.

One of the disciplines that pastors are always reminded to develop, is knowing how important it is to care for our spiritual lives so that we can also care for others. That's probably true for all of us.

C.S. Lewis said, "The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that *other* voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

You are on amazing journeys—they brought you here this morning and will send you out into the world again tomorrow. Where are you on that journey right now? Who are your helpers along the way? How are you are being tested at every turn? And, in the end, what is it that you are thinking that you are bringing back—what will make you more whole, or will help those around you?

Enter into the Hero's Journey as one walking on a sacred path. Our lives are daily encounters with the divine. This is what I would pack: the recognition that faith is in the mystery that there is an answer beyond our knowing in the vast cosmos we call the realm of God. That faith is in knowing that the questions are more freeing by their examination than the belief that the answers are all in front of you. Center yourself by spending some time alone asking yourself (and God) what this all means to you. Take care of yourself. Let Jesus be the hero, (a hero is a son of a god and a woman) who guides you on your sacred path by example and teachings. "Follow your bliss," as Joseph Campbell would say. Be on the journey. AMEN.

Sermon Resource

- 1) Joseph Campbell and the Monomyth—an outline <http://ias.berkeley.edu/orias/hero/>
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Scripture for Sunday, February 8, 2009

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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