

Jonah...: The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time..
Ps.: On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
1 Cor.: For the present form of this world is passing away.
Mark: And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

In the Belly of Paradox

There are many times I wish I had easier things to say... times when I wish my role was only to soothe and comfort and celebrate, but we believe the truth sets us free.

Faith equips us to thrive through challenges we neither invite and nor welcome, yet faith in God makes a way for us when we could not make a way by believing in ourselves and having faith in our own power.

Surely living in this pandemic is helping us to understand our faith in new ways; surely social unrest and domestic terrorism present unwelcome challenges to our faith, leading us to ask where is God in all of this, and in all of this how is God calling us to respond in faith?

These challenges are like Jonah's whale, swallowing us up as we run away from God's call on our lives only to find ourselves belched upon the seashore of our Ninevahs, answering God's call despite our efforts to flee it, which, after all, is the story of faith we find again and again in scripture.

So friends, let us discern together what the disturbing and challenging call of God on our lives means for us in this time and this place.

Let us Pray

May the words of my mouth,
And the meditations of our hearts this day,
Be pleasing to you,
O Lord our God:
Our Rock and
Our Redeemer.

Few writers capture the paradox of God's call like the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who says "like [Jonah] himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox."

In what seems self-contradictory and absurd lies a deeper reality and truth.

In answering the call of God, Merton says, we discover our true selves, moving away from the false selves that emerge as we protect ourselves from people or social pressures or shame or dis-ease.

The experience of opening ourselves to the call of God on our lives and moving away from the known into the unknown most often comes as a response to the personal crises we suffer, to traumas we experience alone and together.

Merton's understanding of call is hard won; his experience of depression was for him the belly of the whale; the paradox he names an experience common to us all--when we run away from God, or when we find ourselves swallowed up by the darkness, we find ourselves being carried toward God, though we do not know it at the time, and later come tell the story with wonder and gratitude.

I often find myself struggling against the notion that the call of God is only about pastors, but this understanding of call is not what God intends for communities of believers, for we are all required to answer the call of God on our lives, to employ our gifts and give our time to the glory of God. Whether we are mechanical engineers or county workers or accountants, we are all called by God, and we are all responsible to struggle with the paradox of call.

It is neither sufficient nor faithful to say "I don't have time" or "I am too busy" or "I don't want to get involved in church politics," for the call of God is given to all of us and is not equal to all the other demands, and the paradox is that we have more time and more life and more of everything important and lasting when we ourselves as individuals and as a congregation accept our responsibility to answer the call of God on our lives.

In 1956, Richard Niebuhr wrote a book called “The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry.”

In 1956, Ike was President.

In 1956, the South was segregated.

Way back then, there were four TV networks and families had only one phone number.

The Korean War had ended and we were just getting involved in Vietnam.

In 1956, we had yet to witness the assassinations of a president and a civil rights leader. There were more.

Back then Watergate was just a building in Washington, DC.

And in 1956 churches began adding on to their buildings for the post-war boom of children and families coming to church; in fact, our church undertook such a building project around this time.

In 1956 and for years afterward the church as an institution was flush with resources: women who had not yet entered the workplace gave their time and energy to the church, serving on council and boards was a high honor; there were no traveling youth teams; playing sports on Sundays was unheard of, and businesses were closed on Sundays, so owners and employees could attend worship services.

In short, the church was the center of American life and culture, and here lies the paradox: the world was changing, and the institutional church was called by God to change with it, through social upheavals, through rise of the civil rights movement, in the liberation of women. The institutional church, however, most often did not find the call of God in these challenges, but rather saw the changing world as a threat to the institution.

The paradox of the call of God back then and today is that God prepares us for and calls us into these challenges at the very same time voices are raised up saying we should hold fast to what we already know and stand firm with what we already love, though to hold fast and to stand firm on what we have known in the past often prevents us from answering the call of God in our lives today.

Take for example the call of two sets of brothers, [Peter] and Andrew, James and John, who are mending their nets, preparing to go fishing.

There they are on the seashore, doubtless a short walk from home and hearth to the boats they have built or inherited that are the means by which they feed their families to earn a living;

James and John are in fact working with their father, but Jesus comes along and calls them away from all of this into the unknown. James and John abandon their own father; [Peter], we know, has a mother-in-law and therefore a family of his own, whom he leaves behind when Jesus says, "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

We cannot faithfully answer the call of God now or ever without leaving behind people and things we know and love, ways of understanding ourselves and others that have made sense in the past but no longer do, ways we structure our time and organize our lives and our work.

Answering God's call and moving forward necessarily means leaving behind what we have known and loved and has held meaning for us in the past but have become burdens holding us back and limiting our ability to share the love of God with the least fortunate among us, for whom Christ died.

If I were a psychologist, I would offer a schema to help us see how the trauma and difficulty we are living through may lead us to respond in fear and turn inward and project our anxieties on others by demanding the world and everyone else change to match our longing for a time that is no more, but as a faith leader I have another message of hope to offer.

It is this paradox: within this suffering and within this challenge, inside of whatever hardship each of us may face, God is present calling us forward, nudging us to leave behind past things that hold us back, coaxing us into a future that will transcend what we have known in the past or could imagine for our future.

But this paradox of call is not easy, friends, and I cannot make it easy for us.

When we say yes to call, when we step forward into the unknown, we discover our truest selves, and then paradoxically we then see the false selves we have put on for

others, the ways we have pretended so as to protect false unity, the ways we have held back what we can give because we are worried how others will judge us.

All of these things we are called to leave behind, and when we leave them behind and follow Christ into the world there we find our true selves, who God calls us to be, who by faith we are becoming.

God calls us away from relationships that force us to sacrifice our true selves; God calls us to leave behind habits that hurt us and those we love; God calls us into new power to love with life-giving integrity, making room for new life to emerge in us and in others; for this is the structure and paradox of call, the structure and paradox of love, the structure and paradox of faith.

If there were no paradox, if faith were solely about comfort, then faith would be altogether unnecessary, and we could merely follow the traditions of the past and serve our own comfort and tend to our own families and make time for God when it is convenient and agreeable and easy,

But as we are more aware now than ever, life is challenging. Loving people when they are struggling and we can't decide how much to help is really, really hard; and the world is changing in ways that leaves us wondering how we will manage the days ahead.

This is precisely the time when we become ready to answer the call of God on our lives.

Yes, yes: I know what I am saying is completely paradoxical, it makes no sense except by faith.

To accept what I am saying means admitting to a level of human vulnerability that terrifies us all, but in these challenging times--in the world, in our homes, at work, in the church--God is calling us to follow, to leave behind what limits and burdens us, and to move forward in faith that God will not merely make a way for us, but we will make us thrive and we will be renewed and through us God will provide hope for us and others, healing for us and others, reconciliation for us and others, because we are all part of this broken and hurting world.

May we all be open the paradox of God's call on our lives, I pray,
And may God bless you and your family and friends,
And May God bless Windsor UCC