

“A Life of Purpose”

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Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42

[God] made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of [whose] hand ... hid me;

[God] made me a polished arrow, in [whose] quiver... hid me away.

And... said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

Isaiah 49:2-3

In Autumn of 1988, I was on temporary duty

working as an assistant to the Post Chaplain

of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

For three months, I had the early morning Sunday service and pastoral duties

working with soldiers and their families at the Protestant Post Chapel.

I was not ordained, but served in the US Army Reserve as a Chaplain-in-Training

and had the opportunity to work again with a chaplain friend of mine

with whom I taught Leadership-Ethics

at the Ft Gordon Signal Officers School in Augusta, GA.

This was during a period of discernment for me, right after seminary

with no immediate plans in place for the future.

Coming out of seminary, I was not ready for parish ministry –

neither was I ready to go back into the Army as a full-time chaplain.

I had heard you don't go to seminary to find your faith,

and it is a blessing if you still have faith by the time you graduate.

It is a time of testing – and questing... about what one believes,

and even then, there is a certain amount of unlearning you have to do

and a periodic clearing out of the idols –

but also hanging on to what is true and what works...

All along, I wanted to do a specialized ministry that included

working with youth, ecumenical/interfaith ministry,

as well as combining arts and spirituality.

I had come across a ministry called “At-One-Ment” – a play on the word “atonement”

at a Franciscan abbey called Graymoor at Garrison, NY

just across the Hudson River from West Point.

I went out there to learn more about it and met a priest named Father John,

who was very patient to listen to me and my call to a spiritual vocation;

and he suggested I come back for a personal retreat overnight.

So, in mid-November on an overcast Friday night

I arrived at Graymoor and after attending evening Vespers,

I went to my monastic room for a silent retreat.

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I got up several times that night to go to a small chapel,
open the Bible at random to read and then pray.

Though I was restless that night, I felt that I had found something
as a hopeful clue about the direction my life was to take.

One of the texts I found included this phrase from Isaiah:

*[God] made me a polished arrow, in [whose] quiver... hid me away.
And [God] said to me,
“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”*

A ‘polished arrow’ is not used for target practice and this suggested to me
that this was a promise that I would have a life of purpose.

We all do. We all have lives of purpose –

though I don’t think we all look at life quite that way;
and it is really our choice whether or not

we take stock of those talents and opportunities and respond to them.

It is reassuring, though, to read such words and believe
that they apply to you somehow.

In preparing for this sermon, I recognized the phrase about
the ‘polished arrow’ which prompted my memory of that time,
but then I noticed the verse begins in this way:

*[God] made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of [whose] hand ... hid me;*

What this signifies to me is the significance of how Biblical storytelling
has played as an organizing factor in my ministry,
allowing me to combine art with my pastoral duties,
as I preach and teach and minister to others.

That ‘sharp sword’ is God’s word – and it cuts both ways

for speaking truth to power and holding the speaker accountable.

To be ‘in the shadow of [God’s] hand’ also carries two meanings:
for protection and discipline.

Doesn’t it take the perspective of decades sometimes
to see how such promises come true?

It has not always been easy, but I have been amazed at how my life
has unfolded and that it has been pretty interesting so far...

This summer, I will go on a sabbatical – a time when things are relatively quiet here.

We have a very capable group of lay leaders and
a supportive network for pastoral care, and
working closely with the Diaconate,

we expect to have good preachers to fill the pulpit.

Willard, p.3

The stated purpose of my sabbatical is:

- To REGENERATE and grow my creative skills for delivering the message of Jesus Christ through graphic and performance art.
- I will accomplish this through independent and programmed STUDY, balanced with family-time and healthy exercise.
- I will provide a presentation upon my return as a REFLECTION of what I learned and experienced...

It is also a pilgrimage to close the circle to some extent and recap what I have learned in the meantime since seminary.

There will be three parts to my sabbatical:

I will fly out to Washington state to a place called the Grunewald Guild a conference center for Christian artists.

where I have been chosen to be an “artist-in-residence”.

I will have studio space along with free lodging and meals; in return for setting up meals and cleaning bathrooms – a fair exchange.

Haven’t decided what my specific art project will be, but it will involve drawing.

I first heard about the Grunewald Guild when I attended Faith Works – the UCC’s national cultural festival held at Purdue University in 1990.

I was able to attend because of my former youth minister, Pastor Lori Witmer-Roberts of Bernville UCC, who made it possible by arranging for me to get a scholarship and transportation out to Indiana.

Chance or holy coincidence or ‘Godwinks’ lead us on to make connections to bring clarity to just what our call is, though where it will come to harvest, we may not yet see – again, sometimes for decades...

On the way back from Washington and throughout the second part of my sabbatical which will be a road trip from Florida to Massachusetts and back,

I hope to see Lori and Fr. Ed Sanders, SJ who first encouraged me to ‘be aware of the stories that come to me to tell’.

Both helped me to keep Biblical storytelling a significant part of my journey which will be part of this sabbatical journey as I do storytelling along the way.

I will also see family & friends including church members Barbara & David Mann, Carol & Jerry Wahlenmayer,

but also theologians, artists, and storytellers:

Tom Boomershine, Dominic Crossan, June Keener Wink,

Robert Bela Wilhelm, Jay O’Callahan, Charles McCollough,

Lucas Franck, and Richard Humphreys.

I also plan to do a memorial for another guide who encouraged me along the way – Chris Farlekas, which I will do at a place called Pacem in Terris which was founded by Frederick & Claske Franck.

Willard, p.4

The third part of my sabbatical pilgrimage will be to go to Washington, DC for the Network of Biblical Storytellers festival gathering the first week of August, flying up and back to Florida.

The second Sunday of August will be my return to UCC at The Villages.

I'm telling you all this, because I want you to be part of it.

Those first disciples – who became The Twelve, were looking for something and were ready when God showed up.

The Disciple Andrew came up to Jesus and he said,

“Rabbi, where are you staying?”

And Jesus said, “Come and see.”

It was all about these chance encounters that lead to lives of purpose as Jesus proceeded into the world to make all things new – or at least help people see this world in a new way.

The story that follows this one at the end of the first chapter of John is one of the first stories I learned...

Inspired by John 1:43-51

JESUS RESOLVED TO GO THROUGHOUT THE GALILEE

AND HE HAPPENED TO FIND PHILLIP,

AND SAID TO HIM, “FOLLOW ME!”

PHILLIP HAPPENED TO FIND NATHANIEL AND SAID TO HIM,

“THE ONE WHOM MOSES WROTE ABOUT IN THE LAW

AND THE PROPHETS IN THEIR WRITINGS –

WE HAVE STUMBLER UPON HIM!

JESUS JOSEPHSON, FROM NAZARETH!”

NATHANIEL SAID,

“NAZARETH! CAN ANYTHING WORTHWHILE COME FROM THERE?”

PHILLIP SAID TO HIM, “COME SEE FOR YOURSELF!”

JESUS SAW NATHANIEL COMING TOWARDS HIM AND SAID ABOUT HIM,

“LOOK HERE! AN ‘ISRAELITE’ IN WHOM THERE IS NO TREACHERY!”

BUT NATHANIEL SAID TO HIM,

“NOW HOW WOULD SOMEONE LIKE YOU

KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME?”

JESUS ANSWERED HIM, “BEFORE PHILLIP CALLED YOU,

YOU WERE ‘UNDER THE FIG TREE’; I SAW YOU.”

NOW [WHATEVER IT WAS THAT HAPPENED

‘UNDER THE FIG TREE’ MUST HAVE BEEN SOME CRISIS

OF LOYALTY AND TRUTH BECAUSE...]

NATHANIEL ANSWERED HIM,

“O RABBI! YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD! YOU ARE A KING!

YOU ARE AN ISRAELITE LIKE ONE OF US!”

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BUT JESUS ANSWERED HIM,

“BECAUSE I SAID,

‘I SAW YOU UNDER A FIG TREE’, DO YOU TRUST ME?

YOU WILL SEE GREATER THINGS THAN THIS!

I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,

YOU WILL SEE THE HEAVENS HAVING BEEN TORN OPEN

AND THE ANGELS OF GOD ASCENDING AND DESCENDING

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE SON OF MAN –

THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY!”

Amen

*Our lesson from Isaiah 49:1-7 is the second of the “Servant Songs”,
proclaims God’s message of salvation not for one human community alone,
but as a universal mission for the sake of all people...*

Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar.

The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.

[God] made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of [whose] hand ... hid me;

[God] made me a polished arrow,
in [whose] quiver... hid me away.

And... said to me,

“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

But I said,

“I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.”

And now the LORD says,

who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength – he says:

“It is too light a thing that you should
be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,

to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers:

“Kings shall see and arise; princes... shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 1:29-42

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,

“Behold, the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world!

30 This is he of whom I said,

‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’

31 I myself did not know him;

but for this I came baptizing with water,
that he might be revealed to Israel.”

32 And John bore witness,

“I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven,
and it remained on him.

33 I myself did not know him;

but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me,
‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain,
this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’

34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

35 The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples;

36 and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said,

“Behold, the Lamb of God!”

37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

38 Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them,

“What do you seek?”

And they said to him,

“Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?”

39 He said to them,

“Come and see.”

They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day,
for it was about the tenth hour.

40 One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew,
Simon Peter’s brother.

41 He first found his brother Simon, and said to him,

“We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ).

42 He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said,

“So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas”
(which means Peter).