

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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Come and See: The Journey with God in a Traumatic World

Throughout human history, people have told stories about what it means to be human. These stories seek to answer deep questions, like, Why are we here? And What is the meaning of life?

Joseph Campbell was a 20th century expert on these stories. He claimed that these stories follow a basic pattern that he called “The Hero’s Journey.” Briefly, the hero in the story lives inside the status quo of a culture. But soon, the hero is called beyond the status quo. She leaves her home on a journey that leads her beyond the status quo, often on an adventure that has trials and obstacles that she must overcome. Sometimes the hero dies, only to be reborn or resurrected into new life. She gains important wisdom or treasure on her journey because it has challenged her to live beyond herself and beyond the status quo of her culture. The hero usually returns home with newfound insights from her journey to challenge the culture that remained at home.

This pattern is a good way to understand both ancient and modern stories. You can see this pattern in novels that have had huge impact on the modern world. Books like *Gone with the Wind*, *Moby Dick*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and of course my personal favorite, *Captain Underpants*. “Never underestimate the power of underwear!” Are you with me!

But interestingly, many of the stories in the Bible follow a similar pattern. (Click) Take our passage from Isaiah, for example. Isaiah was a prophet, and like all the other prophets, [Isaiah challenged the status quo of his day](#). The kings and rulers during his time amassed more wealth for themselves while ignoring the struggles of the poor and marginalized. Isaiah delivered a politically charged message that God required the rulers of the nation reject the status quo of greed by caring for those in need, and if they didn’t the nation would be conquered.

Unfortunately, the political rulers of his day refused to listen to Isaiah. They upheld the political and economic status quo, often justifying the status quo through a false religion that emphasized fate. The rulers worshipped gods of fate who they thought blessed them power and wealth, and cursed the poor with poverty. There was nothing they could do or should do to help the poor because the gods of fate made life this way.

But the prophet Isaiah didn’t believe in the gods of fate. He believed in the true God of compassion for all people, but especially for the poor and marginalized. That’s why he and the other prophets relentlessly claimed that the god we worship matters. If we worship a god of fate who justifies greed, then we will have entirely missed the point. That’s what the biblical language of idolatry is about. The gods of greed are false idols. For Isaiah, the true God is a God of abundance and generosity. Isaiah warned that if the rulers didn’t change their ways the Babylonian Empire would destroy the city.

(Click) Indeed, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in the year 597 BC. They destroyed the city, the temple, the king and rulers, and the king's palace. Many of those who survived the destruction of the city were forced into exile throughout the Babylonian Empire.

This was the most traumatic experience that the ancient Jews suffered. The land was decimated. The temple destroyed. People killed. What do you do in the midst of personal and national trauma?

You grieve. And you go on a journey to find a higher purpose amidst the trauma.

So far, what happened to Isaiah's people has a lot in common with the hero's journey. There's a status quo. Isaiah and his people are forced to leave the status quo as they go on a journey out of their comfort zone. They grieve as they continue to face obstacles they have to overcome.

But one of the things that is different from the hero's journey is that the ancient Jews were not heroes, at least not by worldly standards. More often than not, they were losers. They lost to the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Persians, and the Romans. Empire after Empire conquered the Jewish people. They were losers of the ancient world who experienced trauma after trauma.

And the great thing about them was that God looked at them and said, "I can work with that."

What do you do next? What do you do after the traumatic experience? In the midst of the Babylonian exile, Isaiah thought that maybe his job as God's servant was to restore the nation and bring Israel back to the land from exile. But God had bigger plans for Isaiah and the people. (CLICK) "It is too light a thing," says God, "that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

God's plans were so much bigger than what Isaiah had in mind. During this time of national tragedy, Isaiah's plans were too light, they were too small. God called Isaiah to act big. Because the world needed something big. The world needed the light of God.

Isaiah, and those in exile, were to be a light to the nations. They were to go out among the people and show them God's love. Israel was forced to journey beyond its borders to a strange land. But God hadn't left them. Instead, God gave them a bigger purpose for their journey - to show God's light and love to the world.

We find the same pattern in our Gospel story this morning. Two disciples of John the Baptist meet Jesus and they decide to leave the status quo of their lives to follow Jesus. They asked Jesus where he was going and Jesus responded, "Come and see."

Jesus took them on a journey. They didn't know where Jesus would lead them, but they followed anyway. Like Isaiah and the ancient Jewish people, Jesus and his disciples

weren't heroes according to worldly standards. They weren't violent conquerors who bent their enemies to their will. Instead, as we will see over the next few weeks, they healed the sick, fed the hungry, blessed the poor, and included those who were excluded by the religious and political establishment.

That is the journey, the mission, that our heroes of faith paved for us to follow.

And my friends, we have been on this journey together. We have heard Jesus's call to "Come and see!" At the beginning of last year, did any of you know where Jesus was leading us? Did any of you know that we would team up with strippers to help children in Mississippi who were separated from their parents because of ICE raids? Or how many of you thought we would open our doors to an organization called The Renegade Gospel Choir? And during December, we decided to become an emergency warming shelter, to help save the lives of our houseless neighbors so they don't freeze to death at night. And just during the last few weeks, we decided to share our sacred space with a Latinx congregation who will worship here on Saturday evenings.

I don't know what's going to happen in 2020, but I do know this, we have asked Jesus where he is going and Jesus said, "Come and see." We have been following and we are on a big roll. We are already doing big things. And like God came to Isaiah, God comes to us and says, "It is too light a thing to rest on your laurels." It is too light a thing because we are in a national crisis. God is calling us to journey beyond the walls of our church, beyond the walls of our comfort zone, and to continue doing big things.

I wanted to end today's sermon with a little meditative activity before we start our annual meeting. Because we are on a journey. Each Sunday at worship we take a step towards the God of abundance and generosity, and we take a step towards each other, and then we step out the doors and into the world. And I want to invite you to put words on our steps. So I've cut out these steps and I invite you to write words or phrases of where you personally, and where you think we as a church, might be going this year. What might you and what might we need to work on? Where are we going? Take a few minutes to write down some thoughts. You may keep your steps with you, or when you are finished you can pass your step to the beginning of your pew and I will post them somewhere in the church as a reminder that we are on this journey together...

Let us pray - God of generosity and abundance, we come before you knowing that as you were with Isaiah and Jesus and the disciples, you are with us, too. Help us to come and see what you have planned for us. Like you did with Isaiah, guide us to not be content with small things. Open us up to big opportunities that may stretch us out of our comfort zones, but that will lead us to growth beyond measure. We thank you for being with us in the pain, in the sorrow, and in the joy of our lives. Help us to be present with one another. In the name of the risen one, we pray, amen.