

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It...

Imagine, if you will, the music is playing, “dun, dun, dun-dun, dun, dun, dun-dun...”, fireworks begin going off at the back of the sanctuary. Then, out of nowhere you see me flying overhead, out-fitted in black fatigues and combat boots, zip-lining down from the choir loft, directly over your heads, and then right to the pulpit! I disarm a bomb in seconds flat and then launch into an outstanding sermon. Would that not be the coolest sermon intro ever!? I began to scheme about how I might rig up this whole zip-line thingy, but then my rational thinking replaced my fantasy and I realized that there would be very few scenarios in which this plan ended up ok. My sizable mass, times acceleration, would probably lead me smashing right through this beautiful stained glass window behind me and end up out cold on the front lawn, which would still have been pretty awesome, but health and cost prohibitive.

Oh well, regardless of my own dare-devilish aspirations (some might say delusions), I’m sure you are familiar with the adrenaline-fueled *Mission Impossible* series and movies. Tom Cruise and company are an elite squad of combat experts who undertake dangerous covert operations in order to thwart the evil plans of terrorists and madmen hell-bent on destruction and mayhem. At the beginning of each show or movie, as the stage is being set, these special agents are always posed with the now-famous question: “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to...”

God is a lot like the mysterious leader behind closed doors who alerts us to missions at hand. God had an important mission for Simon and Andrew and James and John, as well as the other disciples. Down on the lakeshore, they were immediate responders to the mission. They chose to accept what would be a dangerous, yet fulfilling call. Christ asked them to follow, to become fishers of people, and they dropped their nets and set forth. We’re never given a reason as to why they followed so immediately. Maybe Zebedee was a real pain to work with? Maybe they didn’t like fishing, were bored with mending nets or were afraid of the water? Perhaps they had simply been waiting for this opportunity to do something grand with their lives.

I think that there are some of us who have always had a clear sense of our calling in life. Some folks know at a very young age that they'd like to become teachers or veterinarians or engineers. Some know that they have a particular gift that can be used to help others – perhaps they are a good listener, have artistic inclinations, or are good with children. Like Simon, Andrew, James and John, these people answer God's call and find their purpose rather quickly.

On the other hand, I would bet that most of us, myself included, struggle with discerning our calls. We think to ourselves, "I have no idea what God calling me to do!" What is my purpose in life? We're not sure what, if any, our gifts are, we stumble from job to job and day to day, never really sure if we are where we are supposed to be. I think that's why many of us love movies like Mission Impossible, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars, etc. because in each of these films, normal characters not that different from ourselves, undertake extraordinary quests to complete incredible missions. These everyday heroes are given purpose for their lives, and we, too, long for that clear purpose! But we usually continue to trudge through our mundane lives, often confused by so many complex issues and seeking out joy amidst much longing and pain.

Some of us might have an idea of God's call in our lives, but we are reluctant to heed God's call, as it's often not in line with what we want for our lives. We try to find ways to hide from God, or distract ourselves from that still small voice calling out to us. Unlike the disciples, Jonah did not drop what he was doing to answer God's call. No, much like many of us, Jonah ran in the opposite direction of Nineveh – where God wanted him to be. He heard God's call clearly, but he was afraid. He had other plans and things he wanted to do with his life. He hopped aboard a ship, hid out in the hull, and headed for a city in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to be. But you know the story. A storm rages and the crew realizes that they are being punished by God because they are harboring a fugitive. Jonah is thrown overboard, swallowed by a giant fish, and given another chance to step up to the plate for God. Given another chance, Jonah undertakes his mission – to call the people of Nineveh to repent – and as we see, he's successful. So much so, that God, who was going to destroy this town, changes his mind and has mercy on these people.

At first glance, we are envious of the disciples along the lakeshore and those people who have a clear sense of God's call in their lives. Indeed, I applaud the faithfulness of Andrew and Peter and James and John, but I then remember that everything wasn't peachy keen after they answered their call. Indeed not. The disciples bumble their way through much of their journey with Jesus. They fail to grasp who Jesus is. They want to know who is the greatest among them. They would like to destroy towns that do not accept the teachings of Christ. Peter claims he'll stand by Jesus during his time of trial, but we all know he'll deny Jesus three times. But, the spirit of God remains with these first disciples, molding them and guiding them each new day. And eventually they do complete their missions and they were amazing missions at that. They traveled far and wide, healing many sick people, performing many miracles, and bringing the gospel message to thousands.

Those of us like Jonah should find comfort in knowing that God is eventually able to work a great purpose through Jonah, and that is what God will do with us as well. Despite our drifting, our confusion, our fearfulness, God is faithful still, and God's spirit continues to move among us each new day, nudging us back on to the path that God has laid out for us. I think this is such wonderful news.

Not long after my father suffered a major heart attack when I was in the 8th grade, he and my mother were out fishing on Chautauqua Lake. It was supposed to be a leisurely evening, as my father was supposed to rest and not lift anything over 25 pounds for at least six weeks. It was a beautiful early summer evening and my dad felt a strong tug on his line. A tug like he hadn't felt before. He wondered if the line wouldn't break. He slowly reeled in whatever was on the other end of his line. At first he thought his line might be snagged on something, but he then found that the fish on the other end of the line was clearly struggling and battling to get off the lure. My dad, who's quite a big guy, worked to balance himself in the tiny aluminum fishing boat as he fought the fish. My mom, in her usual graceful manner, sat back and awaited whatever command my dad would yell. Finally, they caught a glimpse of what was a massive muskie – you know, the fresh water fish that eats ducks. My dad shouted for my mom to bring the net. After quite a struggle, they manage to land the giant fish, bending the net in the process. The fish was so big that it couldn't lie horizontally in the boat. He was estimated to be

over four feet long, weighing forty pounds. They both were in shock at what lay before them in the boat. They barely had any room to maneuver. My father found himself overcome with emotion. Perhaps it was the beauty of being on the water, his most favorite place to be. Maybe it was that he was with his wife who he thought he might never see again. He did tell me he found the huge fish to be quite majestic, knowing that he'd be living in these waters for a long, long time. Whatever the reason, my dad decided to throw him back so that he might continue his life. I wasn't there for this event but my dad explains that he was so incredibly thankful for a second chance – that he was able to survive his heart attack which included him being brought back to life via electric shock – that he just felt compelled to give this creature a second chance.

This story for me illustrates the promise of a new day – the many opportunities and second chances of another day of life. We know that we leave things done every day. We get lazy. We get distracted. We are overcome with fears and insecurities. But God remains faithful. God's spirit moves and continues to push us toward our purpose, be it through gentle nudges or shocking changes. It doesn't matter if you find your calling immediately, or if it takes 60 years, God will find a way to work through you for what you are supposed to do on this earth. The fact is that God does have an important purpose for your life. A mission. Should you choose to accept it, you will be fed and you will feed many others as well. And God will be with you each step of the way. Hallelujah! Amen.