Called by God: Fully Alive

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Isaiah 49:1-7 ~ John 1:29-42 ~ January 15, 2023

Theologian, Howard Thurman, said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In an excellent, thought-provoking book called Quarterlife, Satya Doyle Byock observes that the common expectation for our life’s trajectory envisions that in early years of adulthood, we put our energy into steps that create purpose and stability. We go to school, figure out a career, embark upon it. Many find a partner or mate and start a family. And off we go. According to this pattern, it is after we have created the direction and container for our lives, that we may awake one day down the road in something of a crisis and ask, what is the meaning of it all? I feel restless. I climbed the ladder, but to what end? Am I being true to myself? Meaning-making, it is thought, comes in the second half.

Byock, a Jungian analyst, questions this paradigm. With attention focused on what she calls “quarterlifers” – those in the first quarter, somewhere between late teens and early thirties – Byock observes that while the common pattern works for those more naturally inclined to seek and create stability, a sizeable number of us are more naturally driven to discern or create meaning first – before we have much interest in or can give any thought to stability.

She writes, “Quarterlifers have typically imbibed a whole host of contradictory messages around how to be an adult: namely, to be functional and successful, but also popular and attractive; wealthy and famous, intelligent and interesting, creative and entrepreneurial, but not self-involved or selfish, nor privileged or cruel or unaware of the world’s pain. In order to abide by these competing implicit and explicit directions – none of which are about genuine self-knowledge or self-care – Quarterlifers can become profoundly disoriented. In contrast, the more that Quarterlifers explore the information of their bodies and histories, their old traumas and stress, and their own points of desire and longing, the more they’ll learn to hear what their [hearts] know about their futures.”

Byock has me thinking about how we in the church create space – holy space – that supports young people and quarterlifer’s of all stripes as they explore, and blossom as beloved of God – paying attention most especially to those in society who, as Howard Thurman says, have their backs against the wall. She’s also prompted me to think about the expectations I set for my own children, now in their early thirties, as well as to look back at the choices I’ve made through the years. Being fully alive is not a one-time event.

In our texts today, and in the lives of the prophets, we are presented with the idea that one’s calling in life is fore-ordained. John the Baptist tells us of his singular purpose: to point the way toward Jesus: “here he is,” says John. “I did not know him but I came so that he might be revealed.” He says it again. “I didn’t know Jesus, but the one who sent me told me that it would be the one on whom the Spirit descended.” You may recall that John’s mother Elizabeth felt the babe in her womb leap in the presence of her cousin Mary, pregnant with Jesus. Again, John said to others, “here he is.” And two who heard – Andrew and Peter – followed Jesus. John’s calling in life was to point the way to Jesus. He was born for this; he lived and died for this.

Isaiah, too, was called from the beginning; “before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb [the Lord] named me… as a polished arrow, in his quiver the Lord hid me away.” Now, Isaiah’s calling and purpose is expanding: “It is not enough that you raise up the tribes of Judah and Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

“Calling” is a freighted term and it may be unhelpful to consider our own lives in the light of great souls such as Isaiah or John the Baptist. Nonetheless, I expect we each have a deeply felt sense of when we are being true to ourselves. Just as we know deeply when we are out of alignment and feeling restless; when we are being untrue to ourselves and thus, in turn, untrue to those around us.

I am thinking of calling not in the narrow sense of religious vocation. I am thinking more broadly in terms of how each one of us seeks to discover and engage our own particular gifts – for our own wholeness and perchance as a blessing to others. One way to frame this is to ask, “what is the unique way I was created to give and receive love in this world?” (Linn)

Frederick Buechner’s well known definition of, “vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” It is not just about me, not just about us. It is not enough to be some version of fat and happy or fit and healthy. Dr. King often said that, “we are caught in a network of inescapable mutuality.” Thus, he affirmed in one of his commencement addresses, “Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” Even if we achieve and gain everything we want, at some point the world or those we love will break our hearts and we will learn, painfully, blessedly, that we are never ever alone.

I’ve known many people who have discoovered that when they exercise their own gifts it benefits others more than themselves. Someone with a giant compassionate heart who gives themselves away to others. An artist so devoted to and driven by their creative expression that other parts of their life languish. Novelist Susan Howatch provides the memorable phrase, “costly charisms.”

I think it’s debatable as to whether finding our true calling necessarily results in feeling good. I’m all for feeling in sync, in flow, catching those waves when our heart, body, mind, and relationships all seem to come together. But God is equally present in the holiness of our struggles, diminishments, our so-called failings and weaknesses. Are these not just as precious and potent as our successes and strengths? Our weakness and foolishness is an opportunity for God’s grace.

Even if we feel clear and settled in our sense of purpose, the need to renegotiate and perhaps start over carries on through every season. At any age, a sudden twist – a loss of love, a newfound love, an imagined path or future no longer present or viable for some unforeseen reason. Well into our 80’s and beyond the loss of a spouse, a physical ailment, leaving a familiar home and community – can prompt existential questions about why am I even alive? What am I doing here, in this life of mine?

At every age, discerning our call can be both daunting and exhilarating; it can prompt feelings both of loss and of new lands found. If you believe, as I do, that God is present and speaking to us in and through the very midst of our lives, then this is indeed a holy task.

I’ll close with a story told by Jack Kornfield… “of a tribe in East Africa in which… the birth date of a child is not counted from the day of its physical birth nor even the day of its conception. The birth date comes the first time the child is a thought in its mother’s mind. Aware of her intention to conceive a child, the mother goes off to sit alone under a tree. There she sits and listens until she can hear the song of the child that she hopes to conceive. Once she has heard it, she returns to her village and teaches it to the father so that they can sing it together as they make love, inviting the child to join them. After the child is conceived, she sings it to the baby in her womb. Then she teaches it to the old women and midwives of her village, so that throughout the labor and at the miraculous moment of birth itself, the child is greeted with its song. After the birth, all the villagers learn the song of their new member and sing it to the child when it falls or hurts itself. It is sung in times of triumph, or in rituals and initiations. This song becomes part of the marriage ceremony when the child is grown, and at the end of life, his or her loved ones will gather around the deathbed and sing this song for the last time.” (A Path With Heart)

As God said to the prophets, so God says to you: before you were knit together in your mother’s womb, I knew you, saith our God; I set you apart. What is your song? Let us sing it with you, “because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” Amen.