

SAY WHAT?!

--I am remembering a revelatory moment of some years ago.

It occurred as I was watching TV, when a commercial came on. I just love the constant interruption of commercials, especially those that aim at getting the viewer to do something. This commercial was one of those.

“Go get a pen,” the voice directed, “write down this telephone number and call immediately!”

“Say what?!” I thought to myself, not moving a muscle from my sofa, clicker securely in hand. And I wondered to myself how many people out there in TV-land actually listen to the guy--and who, that instant, stand up, get a pen, write that number down, and make that call.

Then it hit me: Maybe this is how people react to me, too, on Sunday mornings. There I am, week after week preaching my gizzard out, trying to motivate and move people along in their personal and congregational processes. Could it be that the whole time they’re also thinking to themselves, “Say what?! Wake up, you say? Stand up, and get moving, you say? Do something, volunteer for something, give something, you say?”

And I wondered that, if folks in the pews had in hand the equivalent of a remote control, would they be inclined to change the channel, or perhaps turn off the set altogether? “This guy is starting to work on my nerves,” they could be muttering to themselves. “How much longer is he going to be here?” Click!

If there’s truth to any part of this, please do not nod your head. Just let me have my fantasy a bit longer.

--Let us put to the side, then, any possible relevance that there might be here to the present preacher. At a much higher and far more important level, though, isn’t this often how we respond to God? I mean, what is the reading of Scripture, or the morning’s message based on that reading, except “a word from our Sponsor”?

And it doesn’t take long for us to figure out that this “Sponsor” is always expecting some sort of movement on our parts. This One is always mixing things up, stirring things up, standing things on their heads. We’d like nothing better than to be left to our own self-determined busyness (or complete lack thereof), but, no, our “Sponsor” always wants something from us, is always nudging us to get up, get going, and get something accomplished.

We may never speak the words out loud, but, surely, we are thinking them to ourselves: “Say what?! Say what, God? You want us to go where? You want us to change what? You want us to reach out to whom?”

The truth be told, when we hear a story like the one read this morning--God’s prophetic call to Isaiah and Isaiah’s bold, convicted answer, “Here I am; send me!” (6.8)--we think to ourselves, “Yeah, and here I am; and send him! Just leave me be!”

--I am intrigued by human behavior. I am fascinated by what makes us people tick, what we do (or don’t do), the reasons that we offer for it, and, proceeding directly from that, the unbelievable jams we can steer ourselves into. I guess this explains my love for psychology and my interest in always bringing it to matters spiritual. I think that the two have a great deal to say to each other.

Take, for example, the psychology of a fellow named Abraham Maslow, who, writing in the 1960’s and 1970’s,

proposed a number of very original ideas that continue to be worth a long look. Maslow conjectured that all human beings are involved in a process of what he termed “self-actualization”--taking the potential within the self and making it actual, in conscious pursuit of what he described as “full humanness.”¹ If we are part of humanity, then, our purpose, as but half-humans, is to be developing every shred of God-given possibility that we can, from what has been built into us from the very beginning. Whether or not we intentionally apply ourselves to the goal of self-actualization--and while no one ever is able to fulfill the task completely--it remains our highest calling as humans.

Why, I’ve got to say that that sounds a bit like Psalm 8: “What are human beings that You, God, are mindful of them? Yet You have made us only a little lower than the divine beings themselves, and crowned us with glory and honor” (8.4-5).

There is a high purpose set before each and all of us, reminding us of the several stories in our Testaments of being personally called to something great--God’s calls to Moses and Ezekiel, Jesus’ calls to the Twelve. In Maslow’s mind, the stimulus towards self-actualization is among our highest calls, the call to transcendence and wholeness.

That brings me to a question: So, how come we are not all already transcendent or whole?

Because, says Maslow, we all suffer from what he identifies as the “Jonah Complex” (yes, named for the Bible character!). At base, the “Jonah Complex” is a flight from our highest and best. It’s running away from our loftiest talents and rarest aptitudes, fearing our potential greatness. Whether due to anxiety or just plain apathy or sheer laziness, those who are afflicted by this complex (and who isn’t?!) characteristically choose against their fullest, grandest possibilities.

I suppose that can be as true, say, for entire congregations as it is for individuals--not that that has any relevance for anyone here.

--Wait, wait! I see your hand moving. Before you hit the mute button or change networks, listen to the sobering words of Maslow, based on his many years as a psychologist, therapist, and teacher. He makes no bones about the truly worrisome practical implications of the “Jonah Complex,” applicable to both our personal lives and our life together.

Pointedly, he says, “If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you’ll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life.”

Now, what sort of choice is that? Where is the wisdom in letting our inner Jonah make that decision for us?

We don’t get what, at the deepest level, we desire by failing to take the sorts of action that would bring it about. My strong hunch is that God would agree.

I know: Say what?

¹ Maslow, Abraham. The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, New York, 1971, p. 35.