



Nudges and Shoves

First Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 139:1-18

Second Old Testament Lesson: Jonah 1:1-4,7,11-12,15-2:1,2:10-3:3a

Have you ever wondered what you should be when you grow up? Whenever you might grow up?

Have you ever wondered if you are doing today what you are supposed to be doing?

Yeah, me too.

Parker Palmer in his book *Let Your Life Speak* quotes a poem from May Sarton:

*Now I become myself
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces*

The journey of discovering who we are is often a long one, a winding journey, and one that has almost as many steps back as forward. In the church, we call the destination "vocation".

We often associate vocation with a job in the church, but vocation is so much more than that. God gives each of us gifts, and calls each of us to a job or a role in life - a vocation - that will use those gifts in the best way. In essence, we are called to discover who we are - who God has made us to be - and once we find it to be that person as best as we can. You may be called to a role in the church, or perhaps another career in medicine, law, advertising, sports, or science just to name a few.

The good news is that God already knows who we are meant to be. In the Psalm we heard this morning it says: "In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." Some people call this God's Plan for Us, but I believe it's simpler than that - it's God's revelation of who we are.

And we're not alone in finding out who we are. God is present in the journey, and nudges us along the way. Those nudges take a lot of different forms. Most are subtle - an internal tug

within ourselves to something that interests us, a thought that seems to have come from outside of our self, or the words of encouragement of a trusted friend or mentor, or an insight after reading something. Some are more like shoves, not as subtle, taking the form of dreams or visions or hearing an actual voice – and many of the stories in the Bible take that form. However we hear the message, God is with us, and will not let us go until we understand. It just takes time.

Jonah heard God's voice at the beginning of today's scripture. It was a little more than a nudge, but less than a shove. The shoves came later.

Jonah was a prophet, and as such likely accustomed to transmitting the word of God to others. In this story, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and cry out against it for God had seen the wickedness of that city. At the time, Nineveh was an enemy of Israel, and this was a dangerous message, to be delivered to the enemy.

Jonah heard the message of God very clearly, but decided not to follow it. And the nudge didn't quite work in this case. Albert Schweitzer was also nudged by God into his first career, through much subtler means.

Albert Schweitzer heard his early call through a still, small voice. The son and grandson of preachers, Dr. Schweitzer himself chose theology and philosophy as his areas of study at the University of Strasbourg, ultimately earning a PhD at the age of 22. One of his professors advised him to consider a teaching position in philosophy, but he chose theology as his primary focus. In his autobiography he says, "to me preaching was an inner necessity. The opportunity to speak every Sunday to a congregation about the essential questions of life seemed to me wonderful." From his earliest years his call to ministry was expressed through his internal spirit - through his gifts and interests given to him at his creation. And so he went on to succeed in his field, serving a church, leading a theological seminary, and publishing a famous work of theology.

Sometimes God speaks to us through ourselves, by giving us interest in a particular subject, or through us hearing someone else tell us what they see as our gifts. Schweitzer heard that quiet call to ministry in his early career.

My own story of becoming my true self starts with a bit of nudging as well.

I was a lot like some of the youth in this church when I was in high school. I was quite involved in the church, serving as a Deacon and going to Triennium, working at Camp Johnsonburg and serving in the higher levels of the Presbyterian church system. I was also a bit of a geek, taking every computer course my high school had, playing in the band and serving on the stage crew.

I started at Rutgers feeling that I was headed one of two ways – either to a future in the ministry, or to a future working in the computer field - and I started by taking courses in both. Then I had a bad experience on campus, and a few months later I saw a few odd things happen in my work in the greater church. And I came to the conclusion that the church was about a small group of people trying to control the actions and beliefs of a larger group of people. As a result I quit my church roles and walked away. I was done with the church, though not done with God.

More than 15 years later, I reconnected with the church through the camp. One summer Sunday while volunteering, I began to form an inner question - whether or not I should be attending a church again every Sunday. Talking with others I discovered that this was a common question, and I worked with the camp staff to develop a weekend retreat to help adults figure out whether or not to return, and if so how to find the right church for them.

Guided by what I learned at the retreat, my search process led me to Lawrenceville (with a few well-placed nudges from Alicia Pasko Morrison and Jill van den Heuvel). That was in 2006. Shortly after that, invitations from individuals and the congregation brought me to my work with the Deacons and with the youth.

All throughout this time I began to periodically wonder if I was in the right job. I'd been working in Information Technology for 20 years at this point, and I began to wonder if the world of machines and concentrating on the bottom-line and career advancement was where I belonged. My co-workers tell me that I would light up when I talked about my church work, particularly with the youth. I started thinking about and researching seminary. I bought the Parker Palmer book that is referenced earlier and in the bulletin, and spent lunchtime at work reading it to try to figure out what I was feeling and hearing around vocation. Something was beginning to change.

There are three questions that I have for you to consider today about your own journey. The first question is this – when have you heard a nudge from God in your life? When have you made a choice without really knowing why you did? When has someone else said to you “You really should consider” this or that, often without knowing why they were asking the question? Has God nudged you? Is God nudging you today?

Sometimes God gives us a shove, because we need it.

Jonah decided to turn from God's direction. He hot-footed it out of town and boarded a ship to Tarshish as a passenger, directly in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

While Jonah was on the ship to Tarshish, God turned to shoves. God caused a great storm to come up on the sea and put the ship in danger. This storm was bad enough that it scared even the seasoned sailors on board. The crew, realizing that Jonah was the cause of their trouble, asked him what they should do to him, so that God would end the storm. Jonah, apparently seeing that he was putting their lives in danger as well as his own, told them to throw him overboard so that the sea would become quiet for them. Jonah understood that he had taken a course against God, and begins to show signs of a change of heart - at least as far as putting others in danger.

Finally in desperation the crew pleaded directly to God. They asked for God's forgiveness for what they were about to do, and then threw Jonah overboard, expecting him to drown and at that point the sea calmed.

Jonah expected to drown, in order to save the ship and the crew. But instead, something fantastic happened. He was swallowed up by large fish. And scripture tells us that he lived in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

God's shove for Jonah was very clear. Albert Schweitzer's shove was a little more mysterious, but just as clear to him.

One summer day in Schweitzer's 21st year he awoke, and lying in bed he pondered his good fortune. Before he finally arose he had reached a decision - he would pursue his passions and scholarship until he was 30, and after that he would devote himself directly to serving humanity. The exact nature of how he would do that wasn't yet clear, but the direction was.

Another morning eight years later he found a copy of the magazine of the Paris Missionary Society on his writing table. He was about to put the magazine down and take up his studies when an article caught his eye - “Les besoins de la Mission du Congo” - The needs of the

Congo Mission. The article spoke of the mission of the society in the French colony of Congo - the mission that was founded by Robert and Isabelle Nassau, who were members of this church. The author of the article expressed the hope that his appeal would bring some of those "on whom the Master's eyes already rested" to a decision to offer themselves to this work, concluding "Men and women who can reply simply to the Master's Call, 'Lord, I am coming,' those are the people that the Church needs." Schweitzer's autobiography states the working of God in his heart very simply: "I finished the article and quietly began my work. My search was over."

Albert Schweitzer expressed the shove as a clear call – through the words of a magazine writer but nonetheless directed clearly at him.

For me, the shoves started in the summer of 2008 - a summer of extremes.

The high for the summer was the youth conference trip. Our church staff and advisors led a group of youth and young adults to the Montreat Youth Conference for what was my first time at the Montreat center. The trip connected me with my prior church life in ways as subtle as listening to Sheridan singing while Rich played guitar, to ways as extraordinary as an experience that I had during a worship service that I can only call a vision. It was made clear to me that week that while I had been considering my past church experiences and my present church experiences two separate parts of my life's story, they were actually one journey. I left Montreat feeling the best I'd felt in a very long time, and at the same time wondering even more whether I still fit in the corporate world that I lived in every day.

And then 10 days later, I was laid off from my job - a job that I'd held for over 13 years. And ... in one morning I was cut off from my income, from the large part of my sense of self-worth that was wrapped up in my job, and from the friends that I saw everyday. I was isolated, spending a much larger part of my day alone at home. I'm an introvert, but at some point being alone that much becomes too much.

To this day I'm still not sure of God's part in my layoff. At the time it felt very much like I was being kicked out of the nest - that I needed to get out of my old job and consider the church as a career. Or maybe it was a little like being thrown into the sea.

For the next 18 months I searched for another Information Technology job, with no success.

In December of 2009, I interviewed for and was nearly chosen for an IT job in a non-profit organization, indirectly supporting youth. After a few weeks I was told that another candidate was selected – that it was "this close" - and I was devastated. I began to wonder why God had chosen to ignore my prayers, had left me standing alone. Through my work on the Deacons and in the church, I very clearly saw God at work in other people's lives, but not in mine.

A few days after New Years God gave me another shove.

One particular morning, I was lying in bed and suddenly had the feeling that I was standing up next to my bed. Next to me, on my left, was this sort of orange-colored, milky, cloud - about the size of a person. It was completely clear to me that this was God. At the same time I got the sense of two things happening at once.

The first thing was that I was standing looking out into the world, and God was standing next to me looking into the world. Both of us were silent but fully present to each other. God was there for me.

The other thing that was happening at the time was a sense that I was standing looking into the world, and God was facing me ... screaming and gesturing at the top of God's lungs, gesturing wildly ... and I wasn't getting any of it. The idea was very clear - that God wasn't ignoring me, but that I just wasn't hearing the message.

Through all of this I had a sense of eerie calm that I'd only felt once before - during the vision at Montreat. It felt like all of my troubles were lifted and that all was right with the world.

And then it ended, and I was back lying in bed.

A couple of weeks later I was having a rough morning and a friend offered to have coffee. She is a pastor in the area, and a recent graduate from Princeton Seminary. During the conversation I talked about what was bothering me and I inexplicably found myself asking her for information and advice on attending seminary. That started a more earnest process of discernment about seminary and a call to ministry.

So, my second question to you is: When have you felt a shove from God? Has God ever reached out to you to tell you something in a way that made you just Stop and take notice? Is God shoving you today?

Throughout all of the disruptions in life, God is still with us. God walks beside us on the journey that God has made.

God was still with Jonah even after he was thrown overboard. After three days in the fish, Jonah was ready to talk to God. In a poetic prayer, Jonah speaks of his distress after being thrown into the water, and how he cried out to God. Jonah spoke of being distant from God, never again to be in God's sight, but that God pulled him up out of the water. Jonah prayed that he would do what he had originally vowed to do.

And at that point, God caused the fish to spit Jonah out onto dry land, and Jonah again heard the voice of God telling him to go to Nineveh. And this time, he did, proclaiming God's word there.

And the people there responded, and in turn were spared.

Albert Schweitzer had a happy ending as well, with God's help.

Over the next eight years Dr. Schweitzer concluded his work at the seminary and began his medical studies to become a doctor. At the age of 38, he reached the mission at Lambarene and began his work. In his two trips to Africa before and after World War One he re-established a clinic from the ground up that had a capacity of 200 patients.

I concentrated for the rest of last year on discerning whether or not God is calling me to seminary and the ministry. I met with a number of people and audited a class at the seminary. The Session of this church and the presbytery have taken me under care in the official "becoming a Presbyterian minister" process. My wife and I have worked hard at discernment of what the changes to our life will be, and have planned for school and the future. I will be starting my Master of Divinity degree at Princeton Seminary this summer.

And God has been with me, though at times I didn't quite see it. This church, particularly Jill Cifelli, Rich, some youth and some friends, supported me, as well as my friends from Facebook and Twitter. The church and the Deacons in particular gave me a place to use my time and talents for good and I found myself choosing to work for the church to fill my time. I also had the

support of my loving wife who rode the rollercoaster with me, going through her own journey that my situation caused as I went through mine. God was there to support me through the long dark time.

So here's the third question – when have you felt God with you on your journey? How have you felt God's support during the hard times? Who has been the face of God to you?

God is with us. God has known each of us from the moment that we existed, and knows who we are meant to be. God helps us along the way in ways both quiet and still, and loud and unusual. With God's help, each of us can find the way in God's time to becoming the best person that we can be.

And that is good.

Amen.

Deacon Mark Smith

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