

Being a Quiet Hero

We are now in the season of Advent, and today is the feast day of St. Andrew, the apostle. Our gospel today features Jesus calling Andrew and Peter to be his disciples. They were ordinary fishermen; they had been disciples of John the Baptist. They accompanied Jesus as he preached the Good News and healed the blind, the lame and the sick throughout Galilee and Judea during his ministry. Peter, of course, is much better known than his brother. Peter is a star; Peter is impulsive. Peter is featured in many scenes in the New Testament. Andrew is his quiet brother. He has no lines in the entire New Testament, but he did the right thing when the situation called for it. He found the boy with five loaves and two fishes that Jesus used to feed 5000 followers. Tradition tells us that Andrew preached the gospel in Greece after the Ascension and was martyred for his faith. Andrew is a quiet hero; he can be an important model for us, because few of us will ever be famous like Peter, his brother.

What does it take to be a quiet hero? John Wooden, the great basketball coach at UCLA, said "Character is doing the right thing when nobody is watching." Who does the right thing when no one is watching?

Parents who wake up in the middle the night to comfort their sick children are heroes. Teachers who go the extra mile to assist students with learning disabilities are quiet heroes. Nurses who work the third shift and, although they are tired, offer quality care to their sick patients. Accountants who counsel their clients to submit accurate tax returns are quiet heroes. Police are quiet heroes when they answer a domestic violence call as a husband is threatening to kill his wife. They knock on the door, knowing they may be shot by the enraged husband. They do the right thing when no one is looking. They calm both parties down and escort the wife to stay with her sister. For 20 years the men and women of our military fought in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; they fought bravely and risked their own lives when no one was watching.

Sometimes teenagers can be quiet heroes. The teenager who comes home from school and sees his mom totally stressed out and offers to help her to relieve some of her stress is a quiet hero.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that in the Church there are neither Jews nor Greeks. There should be no hatred, no division between groups. In school or on the job we may see someone belittled or bullied because they belong to an outgroup. They may be gay or trans, Black or Latino, shy or autistic. A quiet hero

does not walk away when he sees someone being harmed. A quiet hero is an ally who steps up and defends the person being attacked because it is the right thing to do.

Years ago, one high school student noticed another being sad and withdrawn at school that week. The depressed youth's name was Phil. Phil was not a close friend of the other boy, but the other boy was kind to him and said "You look like you're having a bad day. Is something wrong?"

Phil said he didn't want to talk about it. Later that evening Phil texted the other boy "Thanks for being my friend." The boy receiving the text got a bad feeling about that message. It was like Phil was saying goodbye. The boy told his parents he was worried about Phil. He had the vague sense that Phil might be thinking about taking his own life. The boy's parents called Phil's parents and Phil admitted to them that he did have thoughts of wanting to die. They called me and I learned that Phil's biological mother had committed suicide when he was six. Phil had thoughts of dying like she did to be with her. I helped Phil work through the terrible pain of losing his mother so that he was not plagued by suicidal thoughts. Phil's classmate was a behind the scenes hero; he really did save Phil's life.

On any given day this Advent we may have the opportunity to be quiet heroes like Andrew or Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus, who also had few lines in the New Testament, but an important role. We can live as St. Francis of Assisi encouraged his followers:

"Preach the gospel at all times;
use words only when necessary."

Let every one of us take heroic action when someone really needs us to step up this Advent and the rest of our lives. As we prepare for Christmas, let us remember St. Francis' words:

Preach the Gospel at all times;
use words only when necessary.

Stan Heck

Building Your Resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after being knocked down.

Resilience is not an inborn trait, but a set of behaviors or coping skills that enable us to cope with life's challenges.

1. Have a **faith** to live by.
Being a Christian does not mean having all the answers.
Being a Christian does not mean God granting you an easy life.
Our faith gives us a rock to stand on, a mighty fortress, a loving mother.
Jesus, Emmanuel, stands with us in difficult times.
Our family and parish friends stand with us in our dark days.
2. Have **friends** to lean on – where you can be yourself and not put on a false front. Join a group – a prayer group, a Bible study, Holy Name Society or Holy Dames.
3. Give yourself **time** to adjust the challenges.
Time to mourn, time to rest, time to heal.
4. Take care of your **body**.
Exercise, get enough sleep and eat more fruits and vegetables!
5. Be **mindful**, self-aware.
Showing compassion to yourself, especially during times of stress, is wise, not self-indulgent.
6. Avoid acting out – drugs, alcohol, gambling, porn, excessive spending.
7. **Accept** that change is part of life – give it to God.
8. Let go of negative thinking – self-hatred, angry ruminating or catastrophizing.
9. Be **grateful** -- to God and family.
Even in dark times we have much to be grateful for:
 - life, water
 - central heating and air conditioning
 - food and clothing
 - friends to rely on.
10. Be **generous**.
Give to causes important to you.
Volunteer where you, with your talents, can make a difference.

Revised, from the American Psychological Association

Stan Heck

The Prophets – Old and New: From Amos and Isaiah to Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa

“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”. A prophet once spoke those words to challenge the nation to embrace the way of life that God expected. Who was that prophet? When did he say these words? Who is your favorite prophet? Why?

We know that the prophets were major figures in the Old Testament. Jesus refers to the Law and the prophets as the twin pillars on which Judaism is based. If we read the Old Testament, we learn that there were four early prophets (Nathan and Samuel, Elijah and Elisha). There were three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and 12 minor prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Jonah, Joel and Obadiah).

I learned as a child that the prophets were important because they spoke for God and they predicted the future. We now understand that the books of the prophets were begun by the prophet for whom the book is named, but were continued by followers of the prophets. So, the idea that prophets foretold the future is now not in vogue. The current understanding of the prophets is that they did speak for God. The prophets were not priests and did not claim institutional power for the validity of their statements; they claimed messages from God himself. The prophets often pronounced judgment on the enemies of Israel. The prophets always pronounced judgment on Israel and/or Judah. The prophets often promised God’s everlasting love would lead to the healing of God’s people after a period of suffering.

Let us return to learn more about the prophet Amos. **Amos** was a humble shepherd who grew up in a small town in Judah. He was called by God to preach to the wealthy people of Israel (the northern kingdom). Amos was one of the earliest prophets and was a strident advocate for ethical monotheism.

I (Yahweh) hate and despise your feasts,

I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.

When you offer me holocausts, I reject your oblations and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle.

Listen to this, you who trample on the needy and oppress the poor people of the country,...

I am going to turn your feasts into funerals, all your singing into lamentation.

See what days are coming – it is your Lord Yahweh who speaks – days when I will bring famine to the country.

Amos preached to the Jews of the Northern kingdom that sacrifices meant nothing to God as long as they took advantage of the poor. In 721 Assyria conquered the Northern

kingdom, destroyed its cities and took its leaders into exile. The 10 tribes of the North are lost to history.

The book of **Isaiah** is most valued among Christians. This book is long and complex and, I would argue, not well edited. Yet it contains passages of great value. This book covers over 400 years of Jewish history from the call of Isaiah (about 740 BCE) to the beginning awareness of the possibility of eternal life (about 300 BCE). This book was written by

- Isaiah the prophet (742 – 689 BCE) and his followers
- Second Isaiah (about 537 BCE) focused on the return from Babylon
- Third Isaiah (about 520 BCE) which describes the rebuilding of the Temple
- Fourth Isaiah (about 300 BCE) who writes about the possibility of eternal life.

The original prophet wrote most of the early chapters of the book (1 – 39). The call of Isaiah is most dramatic.

I saw the Lord Yahweh seated on a high throne, surrounded by seraphs. They cried out “Holy, holy, holy Lord Sabaoth. His glory fills the whole earth.” (Isaiah replies) I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.

Isaiah condemns the sins of Israel and Judah. Yahweh speaks:

What are your endless sacrifices to me?

I am sick of the holocausts, of your sins and the fatted calves.

Learn to do good, search for the poor, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow. Your sins are like scarlet.

Woe to those who from early morning chase after strong drink and stay up late at night inflamed with wine.

The North was destroyed in 721 BCE by the Assyrians. The South was overwhelmed by Babylon in 587 BCE. Some of the Jews returned from exile in Babylon in 537 BCE after Babylon was conquered by Cyrus of Persia.

Second Isaiah focuses on the return from exile (chapters 40 – 55). This section of Isaiah begins with a beautiful scene in heaven. God is in his throne room speaking to his angels:

Comfort my people, comfort them, says your God.

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, call to him that his time of service has ended, that his sin is atoned for,

that he has received double punishment for his crimes.

Second Isaiah also writes the Servant Songs which can be understood as describing both Israel and a mysterious Savior (whom we Christians identify as Jesus of Nazareth):

I Yahweh have called you to serve the cause of the right;

I have taken you by the hand and formed you.

I have appointed you as covenant of the people, a light to the nations.

Yahweh called me before I was born, from my mother’s womb he pronounced my name.

I did not cover my face against the insults and spittle. The Lord Yahweh is coming to my aid, when some condemn me.
I am despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.
He was despised and we took no account of him,
and yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he shared.
Through his wounds we are healed.

Third Isaiah is concerned with communal life after the exiles have returned to Israel. Isaiah predicts a Messianic figure that Jesus identifies as himself in the Gospel of Luke.

The spirit of God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the oppressed, to build up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Third Isaiah predicts messianic peace that will cover the land:

The wolf and the young lamb will feed together; the lion will eat straw like an ox.... A new heavens and new earth I will make.

Finally, some scholars describe Fourth Isaiah, who offers Jews the possibilities of bounteous food and eternal life.

On this mountain, Yahweh Sabaoth will prepare for all your peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines.

On this mountain he will remove the mourning veil covering all the peoples, and the shroud enwrapping all the nations. He will destroy death forever. The Lord Yahweh will wipe away the tears from every cheek.

Jeremiah challenged the Royal/priestly establishment in Jerusalem before the fall of the city to Babylon in 587 BCE. In the Temple Sermon he writes:

Listen to the word of Yahweh, all you men of Judah. Amend your behavior and actions and I will stay with you. If you do not exploit the alien, the orphan and the widow, if you do not follow false gods, I will stay with you. But you steal, murder, commit adultery, burn incense to Baal and come presenting your offerings at the Temple. Do not take this Temple for a robber's den.

Jeremiah predicted continued infidelity would result in the destruction of the Temple and the end of the monarchy. Jews engaged in child sacrifice to false gods in a pagan temple near Jerusalem. Jeremiah says the whole land will be reduced to a desert. Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BCE.

Micah spoke for Yahweh around 715 BCE after the fall of the North. He preached judgment for sin and hope for the future. He is best known for predicting that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and for his summary of the Law:

This is what Yahweh asks of you:
only this, to act justly, to love tenderly
and to walk humbly with your God.

We think of the prophets as being key figures of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet Christians know Jesus of Nazareth as prophet, priest and king. Jesus spoke for God like no other because he was the son of God. After Jesus died, as the Christian movement developed, the gifts of the spirit were seen as central to the life of the church. We can ask: does God no longer send prophets to his people? I believe there have been prophets throughout the last 2000 years and in our own day.

I would offer **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** as a prophet in our times. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who lived from 1906 to 1945. He studied in London for two years and returned to Germany, writing The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer challenged Christians to look beyond “easy grace” and embrace the cross of Christ which may call them to suffer in pursuit of goodness. Bonhoeffer joined the resistance to the Nazis in Germany. He supported an assassination attempt of Hitler, but it failed. He was hung weeks before the fall of the Third Reich.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Such grace is costly because it causes us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace, because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son.

When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die.

Dorothy Day is a complex figure who was born in 1897 and died in 1980. As a young adult, she was a socialist who led a Bohemian lifestyle. She lived in New York City, Chicago and traveled throughout Europe. She hung out with Eugene O’Neill and enjoyed the company of other famous writers. She had a child, Tamara, with an atheist who despised the church. When Dorothy began attending Mass, her life changed dramatically. She embraced Catholicism, was baptized and had Tamara baptized. Her lover walked away from her because of her conversion; she describes her life in her autobiography as The Long Loneliness. Dorothy adopted Jesus’ love for the poor as her mission in life.

I really only love God as much as the person that I love least.

The gospel takes away the right forever to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

What we would like to do is change the world – make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe and shelter themselves as God intends for them to do. By fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of workers, the poor or the destitute, we can, to a certain extent, change the world.

We repent, there is nothing we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as our friend.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 – 1968) was a Baptist minister and civil rights activist who used nonviolence and civil disobedience to arouse the conscience of America to see the injustices faced by poor and Black Americans.

100 years (after the Emancipation Proclamation) the Negro is still not free. I have a dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal. I have a dream, that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream, that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910 – 1997) was born to a Catholic family of modest means in Albania. Her father died when she was only eight. When she was a child, she dreamt of becoming a missionary. She left home at the age of 18 to join the Sisters of Loretto. In 1950 she founded the Missionaries of Charity. She and her followers ministered to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. She was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize and canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church in 2016.

If you judge people, you have no time to love them.

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

At the end of life, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.”

That special power of loving that belongs to a woman is seen most clearly when she becomes a mother. Motherhood is the gift of God to women.

How grateful must we be to God for this wonderful gift that brings joy to the whole world, women and men alike. Yet we can destroy the gift of motherhood, especially by the evil of abortion.

Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at his disposition, and listening to his voice in the depths of our heart.

God speaks to us in the silence of our prayer. God speaks to us through the Church and its leaders. God raises up prophets in every generation to help us see the Good News in new ways. Let us listen.

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Orbis Books: Spiritual Masters

Stan Heck

The Book of Daniel – God Is with Us

Today's reading is one of the most dramatic passages of the Old Testament. In the book of Daniel, three faithful Jews are coerced by the Babylonian king to worship a false god and they adamantly refuse. The king is furious with them and throws them into a blazing furnace. They are saved from certain death by an angel of God who delivers them. They know Yahweh is great; there is no other!

To understand this passage, we need to know more about the book of Daniel and the time in which it was written. The book of Daniel was written in the second century BC when Israel was ruled by the Seleucids; they were Greek kings who worshiped Greek gods and had no respect for the religion of the Jews. The most hateful of these kings was Antiochus Epiphanes. He decided to crush the Jews by obliterating their religious practices. He plundered the Temple in Jerusalem, took the gold and jewels and installed Zeus as the god to be worshiped. He brought a pig into the temple to inflame the Jews and provoke their submission. Some Jews were enamored with Greek culture and went along with his evil ways. Other Jews were faithful to Yahweh and fought the king's attempt to end the practice of their religion. There was great turmoil in the country. The book of Daniel reflects the division in Israel and is considered apocalyptic.

The book of Daniel comes from this apocalyptic tradition and conveys chaos of the second century, a battle between good and evil. In the New Testament the book Revelation is apocalyptic and focuses on the end of the world. Many Bible scholars agree that Daniel was likely a fictional character set in Babylon during the exile in the sixth century. In the book of Daniel, he was opposing the paganism of the king of Babylon. His friends, Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego were coerced to worship a false god and refused to do so. An angel saves them from certain death in a fiery furnace. The message of Daniel to the Jews of the second century is clear:

Do not worship the Greek gods of the Seleucids.

There is but one God -- YHWH is his name.

God is with us.

We may be persecuted for our faith in God, but we need not be afraid.

God will overcome evil.

Apocalyptic books often reflect the chaos and turmoil of their times. Some would say we live in a time of turmoil with a worldwide pandemic, fires and floods, earthquakes and tornadoes, wars and false prophets. Some would say the end of the world is near now. When Jesus was asked when the end of the world is coming, he said he did not know -- only the Father knew. The end of our world may be next week, or may be 10,000 years from now. We are called to be strong in our faith whether we are experiencing turmoil in our personal lives or in our society.

As Father John described in his homily on Sunday, when the foundations of your world feel like they're crumbling, it can feel like the end of the world.

- You have memories of being abused as a child.
- Your child has just been diagnosed with cancer.
- You or your spouse is diagnosed with dementia.
- Your parents have died.
- You lost a good job and have no income.

Years ago, it felt like my world was falling apart when my first wife had a psychotic break, was hospitalized and was no longer able to take care of our young children. I lived in Florence with my children, but drove to Dayton, Ohio every day for a psychology internship. My first check was not paid because of an accounting error at the internship. I was thrown in jail for being unable to pay for a speeding ticket. God was with me in my darkest hour. I was released from jail. My parents rescued me when I needed help with the kids after my wife died. I cried many tears, spoke with a good therapist, and poured my heart out to my God. The clouds parted three years later when I married my current wife Sharon and she became a loving mother to three needy kids. God is good!

God will be with you when there are dark clouds in your life. When we gaze at Christ on the cross, we know he stands with us when we are in pain. When we feel like we are drowning, we can always reach out, knowing that he will be there for us. Sometimes God answers our prayers in the way we hope. Sometimes God's response is not what we expect. He is always our Good Shepherd.

When I am feeling desperate and need to connect with my God,
I often pray Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.

He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff give me comfort.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my foes.

You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.

Our God is with us – His name is Emmanuel.

Stan Heck