

## Homily for Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



This is the only time, in the Church's three-year cycle of readings, that we hear from the Book of the Prophet Jonah. The Book of Jonah is also one of the shortest books in the entire Bible, yet, even at that, we only get the Coles Notes version of the story today. I encourage you to read the entire book-- all two pages of it-- and you will discover so many truths about yourself and your

faith journey.

Like last Sunday's readings we, once again, are given stories of a call and how people respond to that call, including Jonah and the first disciples, and by extension, you and me. These "call" stories are not just Biblical stories; they are stories of every human being who has ever lived, including us right here. Have you ever felt like you were longing for something in life and yet half terrified of finding the very thing you were seeking? Did you ever fear that saying "no" to such a desire would mean self-imprisonment in a life too small? The wonderful poet, David Whyte, ends his poem Sweet Darkness this way: ***"Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of your aloneness to learn anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you."***

What a realization! What brings us alive comes, often times, by way of darkness and aloneness-- two of the things we would give anything to avoid. Yet this downward pull into darkness and aloneness is the pull of your very soul; it is there that your soul is trying to express to your ego who you most truly are... that is, if the ego would only listen. Think of the downward pull towards your soul as a **descent** into your deepest nature. Soul calls you down into depth; spirit's call is an upward call, an **ascent** into union. Soul calls you to pay attention to what is most unique, wild, and natural about you. Soul and nature are almost synonymous. Your soul is who you are in your most essential nature. Similarly, we can say the soul of an animal, a river, a mountain, a blossom is its essential nature. Is it any wonder why so many people claim to get in touch with their souls while being in nature? Maybe part of the reason is because nature cannot lie to you, and your

soul never lies to you either. Your soul brings you to truth in ways your ego cannot. So, listen to your soul. We might not like what it has to say, yet it never lies. Jesus' most powerful moments all occurred in nature, not in synagogue or Temple. Maybe that is how he got in touch with his soul.

All the classic mythological stories have the hero or heroine descend to the underworld; they are in search of their souls. In the underworld they hope to find out who they most truly are. When they find out who they most truly are, they simultaneously discover a gift that they are to offer to the world, a gift that no one else can offer. It is the same way in your life. Soul searching always takes you on a downward journey into the mysterious core of who you are. Our ego, the unhealthy ego that is, never wants us to take that journey to soul. It does not like the risk nor the fear of losing what it has; it prefers to have just more of what will affirm itself. Ego fears encounters with the soul as it knows such an encounter will change the ego forever. What our unhealthy egos do not know is that if it listens to the soul, it will be transformed into a healthy ego; it will have something positive to offer the world, something that the world itself needs. Your job, and my job, is not to save the world. Our job is to find out what is genuinely ours to offer the world before we can make the world a better place.

In the downward journey into soul, our ego just knows that it will have to die to itself in order to be reborn into its true self. It is the dying part that we all resist. Jonah had to, kicking and screaming, die to his own agenda, which was to bring God's wrath the people of Nineveh. ***"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!"*** You can almost see Jonah wringing his hands in delight as he thinks God's punishment is about to be meted out on these "evil" people.

That is the challenge of soul work and probably why so few of us want to do it; it requires the death of our ego so that a healthier ego, a soul-informed ego, can finally be birthed. Only by going down into the world of soul, and not simply flying up into the world of spirit, can we find our unique God-given gift that we are to offer to the world. Only when we dare to go down into the world of soul can we receive the gift of a God-given vision for our lives. A little poem to illustrate this:

***A task without a vision is just a job.***

***A vision without a task is just a dream.***

***A vision with a task can change the world.***

The Native North Americans believed that vision quests, days without any human contact and plenty of fasting, were necessary in order for the Great Spirit (God) to give them a new vision, a gift that would be of service to the entire community. This Call to Adventure, for them and for us, needs a certain amount of maturity, courage, and creativity. The ego of children and those in their early teens is not sufficiently developed to survive a descent into the soul. So, the soul waits patiently for an opportunity to ambush the ego. I think the call of the first disciples was precisely that—an ambush. James and John were ripe for the picking. Jesus was stalking his prey. Their egos longed to hear what their souls were always telling them, but they were only ready to hear it when Jesus appeared. They were ripe for dying. They were ripe for entering the unknown, the darkness, the contradictions and paradoxes of life, much like Jonah was when he entered the belly of the whale. Their old way of fishing for fish was just a job. They knew they had to die to this, if they would ever have a chance of discovering their soul-work—fishing for people. What is your soul work?

Picture a cocoon. The creature within is betwixt and between, neither a crawling caterpillar nor a flying butterfly. In this dark existence, much like a belly of a whale or a tomb, the chrysalis (caterpillar pupa) is upside down. In moments of deep crisis, we get ambushed, our lives are turned upside down. (\* see the addendum below). Notice how the chrysalis does not feed. Similarly, the ego has to admit, with great reluctance, that at some point the outside world is incapable of feeding it. At some point, you just know that the world's opinion of who you are supposed to be and what you are supposed to be doing, doesn't matter. Only a plunge into darkness, an ambush by the soul, will give you sustenance, will give you a new identity, will give you truth, will give you your mission in the world. St. Paul says in today's reading, ***"The appointed time has grown short"*** (you're in the cocoon) ... ***"For the present form of this world is passing away"*** (let the caterpillar die, leave your nets behind, for a soul-guided ego is about to be birthed). You thought your ***job*** was to be a caterpillar, but your ***calling*** was always to be a butterfly. In between was the necessary death.

Harley Swift Deer, a Native American teacher, says that each of us has a ***survival dance*** and a ***sacred dance***, but the survival dance must come first. Once you have your survival dance established, you can wander, inwardly and outwardly, searching for clues to your sacred dance, the work you were born to do. To find your sacred dance, after all, you will need to take significant risks. You might need

to move against the grain of your family and friends. Swift Deer says that once you discover your sacred dance and learn effective ways of embodying it, the world will support you in doing just that. What your soul wants is what the world also wants (and needs). **Fr. Phil**

**\*ADDENDUM.** If we are to dive down into soul and soul work, it's always preceded by a Call to Adventure. In other words, it is triggered by the feeling that we are at a crossroad in life and need to take action. We normally will not go there on our own simply because we feel adventurous. No, we usually have to be taken there. The vast majority of midlife crises might best be understood as overdue Calls to Adventure. The prompt or the spark, can be an affair, job dissatisfaction, an empty nest, a dark night of the soul, a divorce, the death of a loved one, chronic illness—in short, we are at wits' end. Maybe we could even add COVID to that list. If we can stay in the cocoon long enough, we can wrest transformation from the brink of disaster. But just remember, from that point onward, it will never again be business as usual. Or, as St. Paul says, ***“from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, etc.”***