

Your Work: Where Will It Take You?

The safest place for ships is in the harbor, but that is not why ships were built.

Anonymous

Martin Luther King Jr. was an outsider. When he came to Birmingham in 1963, there were a whole lot of people who didn't want him there, including black entrepreneurs who knew that protest was bad for business. After he was arrested a number of prominent white clergy took note of the "outsiders" who had come to incite discord. While in jail Dr. King wrote what we now refer to as the Letter from a Birmingham Jail as a response.

He wrote that he doesn't usually respond to things like this, but as it happens, he's in a jail cell right now so he has some time on his hands. Under normal circumstances, if he took the time to respond to every letter or critique he would have "no time for constructive work."

What I noticed there was that he knew with clarity what his work was. His work – and I don't mean his job, but his mission, his vocation – had taken him all over the country, and now to Birmingham. He knew that he needed to remain focused on the core of his work, and that the work would take him to some unpleasant places.

We wasn't the only with work to do. But he did have a clear sense of what his work *was*. It's a question I ask each of you: what is your work? I'm not asking you about what your job is, or your civic duty, or your political persuasion. I'm asking about vocation: where do your gifts and your passions meet the needs of the world? And where will your work take you?

King's work made him an outsider. But at the very beginning of the letter, he reminds the white pastors that being a faithful outsider stands in a grand tradition of the people of God coming from another place to shake things up. The prophets, he said, left their villages to carry their "thus saith the lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and the Apostle Paul carried the message of the Gospel throughout the cities of the Mediterranean.

In those early centuries, the followers of Jesus were often a mobile people and when they entered a town many folk were not happy to see them, because they preached and lived a message of equality: male, female, slave, free, and that made them outsiders. And yet, it was those early Christians, who knew what their

work was, who were able to put an end to ancient evils such as infanticide, and gladiatorial competition.

Once we know what our work is, we can really change things. But...and here's the hard part...our work will almost certainly lead us away from our familiar places. Your work will take you far beyond your home. Your work will take you far beyond workplace, far beyond communities of sameness and routine. Your work will take you to some very dangerous places indeed. And yet...you must go.

That is the simple message for Abram in today's Old Testament lesson. God says to Abram: you can have the descendants you desire, but not if you sit tight. Not if you stay here. It won't come to you, Abram. You have to get up and go. Go from your country and your family's household the land that I will show you. And from there I will make of you a great nation and a great name. Go.

One of my favorite saints who did exactly that is Patrick. Since we are on the cusp of St. Patrick's Day, March 17, his story can tell us a lot about what it means to carry the faith that is in us in to frightening places, and by doing so transform the world.

There are some mistakes we often make about Patrick. I think because we often think of Ireland as being culturally Roman Catholic, we see Patrick as one of those borrowed saints from the Roman tradition. We shouldn't - he's a big part of our Anglican heritage.

Patrick was born on the west coast of what we now call England in the last decades of the 3rd century. He was a British Celt – not an Englishman, for this was before the Angles & Saxons had crossed over from Mainland and begun to chomp their way northwards. The Roman Empire was beginning to fray, but it still held in this coastal town where Patrick lived. He was the son of a roman administrator named Calpornius and the grandson of a priest.

Patrick was abducted as a teenager by pirates and spirited across the sea to Ireland, where he was enslaved and forced to work as a swineherd. For six years Patrick lived an incredibly isolated life. By his telling, he was always hungry, and usually without enough clothing. Yet in those years of isolation and hunger and exposure, Patrick found companionship in Jesus, and somehow that time focused him on the presence of God, within him, and even in the foreign land where he lived in captivity.

After six years of this, God spoke to Patrick: it's time to go. I understand that he quite literally walked and headed straight for the sea. Escaped slaves didn't

usually get away with it, but Patrick did, and miraculously found a ship waiting that took him to mainland Europe, where he likely entered monastic life. Years later he returned to his home in Britain to be ordained a priest and a bishop.

But Patrick then heard another call from God: this was a call to return to Ireland. Leave the relative safety of Roman Britain, return to the savage land of Ireland, but this time bring Jesus to them. Patrick, go. And he went.

Patrick converted and baptized thousands and thousands of people. He established monasteries that would become the launching pad of a Celtic tradition of Christianity, an authentic tributary of the Jesus movement that was never based in Rome, a tradition to which we as Anglicans are heirs. Within his lifetime or soon after his death, the Irish slave trade came to a halt.¹

Six years in the lonely Irish countryside had taught Patrick an important part of his work: the slave trade that had robbed him of his youth and his formal education could continue no longer. When God said, go do it, he went, and with love and faith, he put an end to it. Isn't it remarkable that he put an end to a country's slave trade, yet we're more likely to remember silly legends like casting out snakes? It's as if we are afraid of our own power.

So what is your work, and where will it take you? When we know our work, we can bring about a more just world. But this work will take us away from here. This work will not allow us to stay where we are familiar, or comfortable, or safe. Are we ready to follow that call? Are we ready to follow Jesus not just to church, but into places of great need and great uncertainty?

I will make of you a great nation, said the Lord. But it won't be here. To get there you must leave your kindred and country and your father's house. To reach the land that I will show you, the land that needs you, where you will do the work to which you have been called, you must be prepared to get up, head to the harbor and board the ship that is waiting. You have work to do. And you must go.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A, March 12, 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

¹ Thomas Cahill, [How the Irish Saved Civilization](#)