

The Hero's Journey



Isaiah 11:1 "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest (up)on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge . . . (And) His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD."

The ancient Old Testament prophets often engaged in myth and fantasy to console the Jewish exiles in Babylon. They dreamed of a fanciful return to the Promised Land, where springs of water would suddenly appear on the dry desert road to ease their journey home and where the high places will be made low and the low places made high in order to create a level and smooth pathway back to their Promised Land. They dreamed of a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb, and the lion would eat straw like the ox, and the nursing child would play over the hole of the asp, and where a root from Jesse would bring forth a new Messiah, a new Davidic King, to bring peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. And like all great myths and fantasies, those of the Old Testament prophets

engendered hope amongst the captives, and in time, the people of Israel were eventually freed by the conquering Persians, and allowed to return home to their Promised land, to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and their beloved Temple, though the road home was uneven, and the desert did not sprout flowers and springs as foretold, but the myth of returning home again was fulfilled.

Similarly, there is a great mythical script to life itself that most of us have internalized, whether we have done so consciously or not. This myth appears not only in the Old Testament but also in many of our most beloved fictional stories, and legends, and poems, and from the outside, at least, it looks a lot like the lives of successful people. It is often called *the hero's myth*, and I preached a sermon series last Spring on the archetypes of the hero's spiritual journey.

It was the 19th-century anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor that first identified the hero's myth in our literature. As he showed, many of the great adventure stories throughout history follow the same basic formula. This is true from the Bible's story of King David, that original root from Jesse, right down to the *Star Wars* heroes of today. We can think of the myths and fantasies of our own personal lives as having these same three identical parts as well. The first is the **call to adventure** which is most often heard in our youth, as we choose our path forward in life as adults, where the hero-to-be is often motivated to act in some

bold way, usually to meet some daunting task – say, like fighting the giant Goliath, or Darth Vader of the evil Empire. The second phase is the **ordeal** itself, a reminder that life is hard, for all of us, and in which we as the hero are often brutally tested by the trials of life and are frequently perceived as having to beat long odds in order to succeed – such as vanquishing the Philistine Goliath in battle with a simple slingshot, or blowing up the dreaded Death Star with a single shot from our fighter plane. The third phase of this myth of our lives is, of course, the **victory**, where the hero wins against these odds and returns home, triumphant and victorious. It is the myth we all seem to want to fulfill in our own lives, and which we all do to some extent.

For we are all heroes of a sort in the end, as we have all struggled to get to where we are today. The problem, however, is the real-life ending, *after* victory is won, *after* the triumphal return home. People have no script for that part. There's no *Star Wars* sequel where Luke Skywalker hangs around the house all day, irritated because someone touched the thermostat again while telling his grandkids about blowing up the Death Star for the thousandth time while they roll their eyes.

Of course, some people flourish in retirement, but for many people who were successful earlier in life, retirement can be brutal: They often feel unhappy, aimless, and bored. In search of – well, they're not quite sure what – and so some then make bad

choices, tanking their marriages for instance (leading to what social scientists call "gray divorce," which doubled in the last 25 years) or making stupid financial decisions that they never would have made earlier in their career, or simply becoming lost in life.

The myth of the hero's journey is thrilling when you're in the middle of it, when you are an exile in Babylon or a slave in Egypt, longing for home and the Promised Land. The trouble comes when we get home, when our strengths start to wane, and reality sets in, because now we're off script. People rarely change the story they've constructed for their lives; and so instead, they get enraged trying to pound their lives back into the story line of a fantasy, often with sad results.

For this rage, I suspect, is of born from a misunderstanding of the hero's journey. Defining it in terms of three phases, makes the mistake of leaving out one last, crucial stage. The literary scholar Joseph Campbell, author of the book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, notes that many great myths involve a subtle twist after the triumph in battle, after success in life. He calls it "The Crossing of the Return Threshold." "The returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the (real) world," Campbell writes. "The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real . . . the passing joys and sorrows, (the) banalities and noisy obscenities of life." In other words, the end

of the true hero's journey is coming home and finding a battle to be waged not with some external foe or enemy, but with one's very own demons. Win that final battle – which is perhaps the hardest one of all – and true victory is yours.

Consider then the case of good King David, that original shoot from Jesse's stump. As a simple shepherd he killed the threatening lion and saved his herd of sheep; he defeated Goliath and saved his people's army; he vanquished Israel's foes and united the twelve tribes to become a great and powerful nation. From shepherd boy to supreme ruler of his vast kingdom, David's journey is the hero's way. No wonder the prophets hoped for another one like King David. But the biblical story doesn't stop there – it continues in the second book of Samuel, where we find the exalted King David in his post-victory life, hanging around his palace with a lot of time on his hands. He wakes up from a nap one day, goes for a walk on the roof of his palace, and spies a neighbor's beautiful wife, Bathsheba, taking a bath. Famous long story short: David pursues an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, and she becomes pregnant with his child. Then good King David sends for her husband Uriah the Hittite, and ends up returning him to die in battle then, calling for his own troops to withdraw and leave Uriah exposed to die, all to cover his disgraceful misdeed.

Ancient Israel's greatest leader, a man of impeccable valor and discipline, comes home from his triumph, and then falls prey to his own petty lust. Yet this is the myth that the prophet Isaiah promotes again and again to console the exiled Jews in Babylon, a myth which then eventually does bring the Jewish people home, restores their independence as a nation, while they rebuild their beloved temple and then, then, where they then await a new Messiah to come rescue them again, this time from the Romans. But the virtuous heroism of Good King David turned to villainous rot not from anything on the battlefield, but precisely because of the "banalities and noisy obscenities of life," precisely because of the ordinary struggles of ordinary time. In failing to succeed in everyday life, David failed in the last, the hardest phase of the journey: being the master of himself. We often do the same in our own adventures.

For on a much smaller scale, we often behave more or less like David, hurting others and ruining our well-earned reputations later in life by giving in to our vanity, our desires, and our insecurities. I'm talking about the CEO who, even in the face of deteriorating performance, won't turn over control of the company, until he gets embarrassingly shoved out by the board of directors, or the aged politician who, rather than cultivating a successor, makes one last run for office and loses badly. Or, closer to home, so many of my retired clergy friends turning bitter and

disappointed in their retirement, aimless and unsure of their place now in life.

Though few lives will take the straightforward path of the hero's journey, that doesn't mean it's not a useful framework for thinking about our own lives. First, we all have a dream, a calling, a vocation, and we go for it. Second, we learn that reaching our goals is going to be costly, that true discipleship requires sacrifice, that life is hard. So, we will suffer some disappointment and doubt along the way in our quest. Third, if we achieve our goals of being successful, we savor our victory.

But don't forget part four – the personal crucible, the retirement years. Unless you keel over in the prime of life, our victories too will evaporate, our skills will decline, our command of memory will diminish, our beauty fades, and life's problems will intrude. If we try to hang on to our past glory, or lash out when it fades away, we will squander our hard-fought victories in life and mark an unhappy end to our journey and career. If you're still in the middle of your hero's journey, it would behoove you to make tangible plans now to show true strength and character in the final phase of life. Plan to spend the last part of your life serving your community, loving your family and friends, and being a good example to those still in the first three stages of their own hero's journey, as we all await the coming of the Lord again to rescue us from the hardness of life, and to finally bring peace

on earth and goodwill to mankind. Until then, our happiness in retirement depends on our choice of narrative. AMEN.