

The Spiritual Task of Practical Theology

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I am deeply grateful to the organizing committee for the invitation to share a reflection this morning. The British and Irish Association of Practical Theology is a true blessing to me as I continue my search for the contours of effective understanding of the task entrusted to us as researchers, practitioners, and teachers of the discipline. I trust that my remarks this morning will serve as a shaping influence to our discussions today . . .

It is an honor to be here to share this time of reflection with you.

I have selected the narrative of Jonah to guide our reflections this morning. I hope to convince us that this ancient narrative serves as a paradigm for the spiritual task of practical theology in the 21st century. My hope, as we join in this time of spiritual focus, is that we will find a way of seeing that opens for us the very questions that we can explore in our dialogue through the conference.

The spiritual task of practical theology is complex, calling for a renewal of spiritual passion, perspective, and posture . . . each of these are apparent in the story of Jonah's calling.

Passion of the Practical Theologian

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord." Jonah 1:1-3

Every indicator in the narrative points to Jonah as a passionate person. His soul-searching encounters with the fellow travelers, his open self-declarations, his deep emotional outbursts, his successful campaign in Nineveh, and the immense desolation at the shelter at the east edge of the city all describe the depth of his ardor. Like many of us, Jonah's journey required a full immersion in the complexities of life. But like us too, this immersion in life takes its toll. By the end of his mission Jonah is depleted, overwhelmed, and disoriented.

Passion is a required quality for the spiritual task of practical theology. Coming to terms with our inner vocation, opening ourselves to the risk of ministry, and gathering our efforts for significant involvement in the city is at the heart of our common craft.

David Whyte in his perceptive volume, *The Heart Aroused*, articulates the disorienting experience of the passionate soul when he writes:

Some things cannot be spoken or discovered until we have been stuck, incapacitated, or blown off course for a while. Plain sailing is pleasant, but you are not going to explore many unknown realms that way. We articulate the truth of a situation by carrying the whole experience in the voice and allowing the process to blossom of its own accord. Out of the cross-grain of experience appears a voice that not only sums up the process we have gone through, but allows the soul to recognize its timbre, the color, the texture, and the complicated entanglements of being alive.¹

¹ David Whyte *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 95.

To truly embrace our calling as practical theologians will call for a crisp renewal of our passion for those we are called to serve. And precisely because of this, it will lead us to the disorienting experiences of passionate engagement: depletion, confusion, disruption, brokenness, and despondency.

Restless
some say sleep
but
night
stalks the soul
until, restless,
we open our eyes.

some say play
but work
penetrates
all time
eclipsing my
very capacity
to enjoy.

some say wait
but the inflection
seems to point the way
to immediate action,
urgent and unrelenting.

some say shine
but anxiety
has worked
its way into
my heart,
snuffing
my smile,
suffocating
my peace.

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It might be wise to ask ourselves this morning, “What stimulates a growing passion for practical theology? What practices fuel and enhance the artful participation in this work? How can a sustained enthusiasm for this work be instilled despite inevitable setbacks?”

Perspective² of the Practical Theologian

But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Jonah 1:17-2:1a

Simone Weil suggests that prayer is “absolute, unmixed attention.”³ In the disorienting experiences of our common work the spiritual task of the practical theologian requires such a prayerful attentiveness.

Numinous silence is the orienting center of the practical theological task. There, in the belly of the great fish, we come to terms with our own spiritual vision. We once again become ‘seers’ – those who taste and see; those who speak from the depths of existence. We pray so that we can be whole and in our wholeness, participate in the compassionate ministry of God in the world.

The narrowing of our horizons that comes with the strains of ministry call for the moral seeing of the practical theologian born from prayerful attention. We must search out the absences and the incongruities all the while retaining our focus on God and the ultimate concerns that occupy our best attention.

Jonah’s prayer reminds us of the importance of spiritual renewal that reorients, guides, and sustains the soul. In whatever ways you have come to practice that spiritual attentiveness of soul, the simplicity of Jonah’s petition may be a helpful reminder:

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you, in your holy temple.” Jonah 2:7

I am reminded of Rainer Maria Rilke’s spiritual poem:

I have hymns you haven’t heard.

There is an upward soaring
In which I bend close.
You can barely distinguish me
From the things that kneel before me.

They are like sheep, they are grazing.
I am the shepherd on the brow of the hill.
When evening draws them home
I follow after, the dark bridge thudding,

And the vapor rising from their backs
Hides my own homecoming.

I, 40⁴

² The themes of ‘perspective and posture’ reflect the influence of James Gustafson in his classic work, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), see especially chapter VII, “Christ and the Moral Life: A Constructive Proposal”.

³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1952), p. 171.

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke *Rilke’s Book of Hours*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p.79.

Perspective is hard to sustain. It requires the diligence of prayerful attention. Moving into the contours of a suffering world we open ourselves to the in-breaking presence of God; we move to the impulse of a deeper perception – a guiding hunch of eternity. A soul-ful waiting that imitates the beauty of goodness. In my deep neediness I find that my own homecoming happens best when I am still, attentive, awake, hopeful, and yearning for God.

Perspective is birthed in prayerful attention.

It might benefit us to ask this morning: What will awaken the prayerful disposition in our searching? How will we attend to God and the ways of God in the world as we search out answers to complex questions?

The Posture of the Practical Theologian

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Jonah 4:5

In the final chapter of the narrative, we find Jonah in a posture of waiting. Waiting to see what God would do. Waiting to confirm his suspicion that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

In some ways this rounds out the paradigm I suggest is most needed for our work as practical theologians. In so many ways the work we are called to inevitably places us in a vulnerable position – who of us have not felt angry at various forms of indifference inside and outside of the church. Who of us have not felt some frustration at the apparent lack of progress in our ministries? What human being would not, after times of intense engagement, sit quietly at the edge of the drama and wait to see what would happen to the city?

In a sense I think this is an important dimension of the spiritual task of practical theology. There is a time, after concentrated participation in the *missio Dei*, to simply sit down and wait. We need to make a shelter in the shade and watch carefully as the unfolding mystery of God's ways in the world teach us more about grace and more about the abounding love of God who relents from sending calamity.

This task apparently needs little more from us than disengagement, and yet, because of the surging emotional needs that ministry demands, this may be one of the most difficult tasks in our work. We like to fix things; we trust our pragmatism and our initiatives seem right to us. We are like the disciples, working hard all night.

The call to sit quietly and watch is counterintuitive.

As we reflect, in these days, on what we can do, it may serve us well to also pay attention to the posture of waiting. While our efforts may be well-intentioned there are times for us to get out of the way, to be still, and to wait in the shade.

I can't really say how this works. But I know that in my own work and life there has been an increasing need to put aside my preference for toil and take the posture of a keen observer. What will happen to *our* cities? How is the Spirit of God at work? What is the most profound possibility?

These questions seldom come to the surface when we busy ourselves with solutions. If my hunch that the Jonah paradigm is helpful, it implies that part of the spiritual task of the practical theologian is, at times, to move to the sideline and build a shelter meant for watching what God might do.

Longings

it's the stillness that I long for.
quiet rays of streaming sunlight
ease into the room
in absolute stillness.

it's the word that I have longed for.
that simple precept –
all-encompassing truth
for a time like this.
a word that 'emerges from silence'.

it's the embrace that I have dreamed of.
the Love that will not let go,
that holds one
as one holds a treasure –
unwilling to let anything ruin.

its' the stillness,
the word,
the embrace,
that we each, all of us,
long for;
and it has arrived.

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Conclusion:

Taken paradigmatically the Jonah narrative is instructive for the modern task of practical theology. It invites us to renew the very passion that got us here and kept us coming back. It reminds us to pay "absolute, unmixed attention" in long nights of prayer that match the complexities we have been swallowed by. And finally it opens to us the possibility that, when we are able to disengage appropriately, we may bear witness to the incomprehensible love of God blessing the very cities that we feel called to serve.

Discerning the contours of the spiritual task of practical theology is an artful pattern of engagement and disengagement. It requires the perspective, posture, and passion that these days of reflection will inspire. I can only hope that we, like Jonah, will continue our various vocations in such a way that we too will recognize the deep concern of God for our cities as well.