

Isaiah 42:1-9  
Acts 10:34-41

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## Nantucket Red and the Kingdom of God

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. *Isaiah 42:6*

I wonder if you've come across a recent book by A. J. Jacobs called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. Jacob's is Jewish, but not a practicing Jew; as he puts it: "Jewish in the way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant." A writer for the *New Yorker* and other blue blood magazines, he asked himself what it would be like to take every word of Torah (the biblical law of the Old Testament), literally. Only one way to find out! So, for a year he let his hair and beard grow, wore sandals and a long shirt, and walked about New York with a ten stringed harp under his arm, and a shepherd's crook, and a single bemused sheep in tow.

Jacobs finds himself at almost every turn tripping over one commandment or another: contriving little falsehoods to manipulate his children to eat their breakfast or finish homework, or casting an unctuous eye after some fair lady on Fifth Avenue.

What would it be like to give oneself to that sort of self examination, or even something like it? To ask oneself about one's Christian faith, discovering what we actually profess, and what we keep under private wraps.

Jacob's book has nothing directly to do with *Alpha*, the ten week spiritual exploration program that we begin this week. But it illustrates a journey to self-awareness and experience of God. Alpha is an extraordinary program that helps us individually get at many of the big spiritual/religious questions we've seldom really allowed ourselves to engage, or perhaps didn't know how to. The stuff we keep well camouflaged, even to ourselves.

Writing in *Christian Century*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of visiting the island of Nantucket, once a thriving whaling port, and noticing people wearing canvas clothing of a muted pink color. Men wore trousers, women vests, and some wore hats made of it. When she asked her innkeeper about the fabric, she was sent to Murray's Toggery Shop on Main Street, to learn all about "Nantucket Reds."

It turns out that well over a century ago the Nantucket whalers used to import a durable French sailcloth that was distinctively red. After years of exposure to sun and salt water the color gradually faded to a weathered pink that came to be known as Nantucket Red, and which is so emblematic of the island. Mr. Murray had the idea of making clothing from it, but rather than let the canvas togs weather naturally on the wearer, he found a way to distress or "weather" the canvas ahead of time, so that visitors who had just stepped off the ferry could walk into his shop looking like landlubbers, and walk out looking like seasoned old sea salts—for fifty bucks apiece.

Now, a pre-shrunk, pre-washed, prefaded, prefrayed, prestained clothing look is all the fashion, giving a vintage appearance to something new. Such fashions seem to resonate to our desire, says Taylor, to belong, to fit in with an adopted coolness. I don't disparage the trend. Many of us nestle to our sense of place in different ways, teenage fashion passions, a display of coffee table magazines as signatures of one's style, "Have you read?" such and such (sounds like your pastor a moment ago!), or "Did you know?" thus and such.

The problem, of course, is that looking like a cowhand in \$200 boots doesn't teach you how to actually ride an unbroken mustang. Neither does wearing pink canvass shorts enable you to reef a mainsail in a 25 knot breeze. Such proficiencies would take about the time it takes French red canvas to mellow to the weathered salmon pink of Nantucket Reds.

These things take time and discipline, like becoming a Christian. I emphasize *becoming* because I did not become a seasoned Christian the moment I got out of my Dad's armchair in January of 1972 after saying yes to Jesus invitation, "Follow me." It took quite a while to get the stiffness out of my new faith tenets. I gradually found I could move easier and with less chafing when I asked probing questions about my faith, and explored the implications of doubts, rather than swallowing pat answers. When I asked myself: "What does my faith experience tell me about Jesus?" or "What does an open, patient intentionally probing, reading of Scripture do for me when I'm willing to be taught?" I started to mature, slowly. Patience was a key—the adults in some cultures chew new leather for days to soften it before making it into a belt or harness or carrying strap. That way it fits the wearer more naturally, like a well worn shoe. That's what people say about "Alpha," that after perhaps some initial unease over talking openly about religion, about their faith or lack of it, it starts to take on the feel of easy fitting garments. Like going home after a long day and climbing into your familiar old skivvies.

Alpha thrives in small groups where people can gain confidence through open dialogue, and leaders ask probing questions. Not fact seeking, knowledge based questions that test what we know, like TV's Jeopardy, but questions whose responses build toward a truth. Questions like, "What do you think?" "What does your experience say?" "Who is Jesus in your experience?" When people in a group begin to feel safe, sensing shared beliefs and doubts in an accepting environment, beautiful things begin to happen. Fragments of thoughts, memories and experiences start to clump together, the way a planet forms from cosmic dust under the impulse of gravity. As the dialogue shifts and turns, each catches flashes of insight. Everyone has opportunity to contribute and capture a piece of it. The leader is not an information giver so much as the prompter, occasionally the umpire, mostly a listener. But these leaders are not professionals like Erin and me—I'll be working with the confirmation class—they are folks out of the pew, just like you.

Do you remember what it felt like, perhaps feels like, to be on a date? You put on your best duds to suit the venue, wash a bit more thoroughly behind the ears, and remind yourself to take your best self with you. Then you meet your date, perhaps for the first time. If you survive the initial encounter you're eager to discover who this person is, so you probe with questions, tell a few lighthearted jokes, share experiences. But what you're really interested in is discovering who this person is at their core, and if there's a sense of connection between you. At a deeper level you ask, does he or she fulfill my needs, fill my void of longing. Do we, in a sense, *complete* each other—which is the point at which we literally feel like we want to pour ourselves into each other. *We fall* in love.

Alpha is like that. It's not a dating service. It's an invitation to a relationship in which we discover who Jesus really is and, knowing him more intimately discover how he completes our deepest needs and yearnings. That relationship influences everything: how we feel about ourselves, how we treat and interact with others, how we manage our desires, how we cope with stress, how we live life to the fullest. How, in short, we complete each other under the influence of Christ.

All this takes time and commitment. But it's made easier by the growing friendships and the trust that's gained. For most people it starts out like a little used soul, too long folded and stored away. But when it's shaken out to catch the wind of the Spirit, it weathers to a resilient softness that moves the ship of faith.

Won't you join us Wednesday night? Discover who Jesus is, and who you are?

Amen.