

Sermon Epiphany 3 Year B 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:6-14

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

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We are off on a new year of Gospel lessons, a new year of telling and sharing the stories of scripture. Jesus has begun his mission and so last week and again today we heard stories of call. Stories of God inviting disciples and prophets into ministry. God has been calling people to service throughout time.

Such a short passage from the Book of Jonah. We didn't get to hear the fantastic first part of the story that all children come to know, of Jonah spending three days and nights in the belly of the big fish.

So, what did we miss? God came to Jonah with a call, a mission. "Go to the great city of Nineveh, go now and denounce it in the words I give you." Well, Jonah thinks, not so fast. Nineveh was in Assyria. They were the dreaded enemy of the Hebrew people for generations. Why on earth would Jonah want to go there, great city or not? He didn't want to go there. No Hebrew in their right mind would want to go either. So, Jonah decided to head in the opposite direction aboard a ship when a great storm comes up. The ship is in danger of sinking when the crew realizes that someone on board must be responsible for the calamity. All eyes land on Jonah and he is thrown into the sea.

There the great fish swallows Jonah. Images from my childhood come to mind. Probably yours do also. I recall a picture from a Sunday school classroom of Jonah on his knees lighting a candle in the belly of the whale. Absurd of course, but memorable. At this point in the story, Jonah comes to his senses and repents, God rescues him. The fish spits Jonah out onto the beach. This time Jonah did as the Lord asked.

The rescue turned Jonah around and off he went to Nineveh, that Great City, so big that it took three days to walk across. Jonah proclaimed God's judgement and in response the people repented of their evil ways.

After hearing Jonah's proclamation, the people of Nineveh repented and God forgave them. Whereupon Jonah is despairing. Jonah, along with most in Israel, hoped that the Assyrians would get what they deserved, judgment not mercy. Yet, God's property is always to have mercy. The message that we might want to take to those different from us is "go back to where you belong." We don't really want to offer mercy. Build the wall is our idea. Send the immigrants back. Send the addicted to jail. There have to be consequences for breaking the law, regardless of the underlying conditions. Much in our society and beyond is working to sow discord and not union. Who will go for God across the divides?

God called Jonah to leave the safe and familiar surroundings and journey to a place of danger and risk. When God calls us to leave the familiar and go on God's behalf, we too might expect this to produce some anxiety. God seldom sends us on a mission to Fresh Market or to Starbucks, to places without risk. Though occasionally I believe God sends us even there. Because even on those trips to the safe and familiar, there is possibility. If we are open. Open to the call of God at such times. To see the new thing that God is doing, right in the midst of the most familiar. Primarily for those whose path we will cross on our way.

In our first lesson, God called Jonah. Next we encounter Jesus calling the disciples from Mark's gospel. Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee when he sees some commercial fishermen tending their nets. With little fanfare he called them, "Follow me." And immediately, they left their nets and followed him. First Simon and Andrew followed and then James and John. But they most likely did not come alone. There were women who followed Jesus as well. Perhaps they were family of these four men and later disciples as well.

Now these stories are dramatic and they involve people immediately leaving all they know and love. Picking up stakes and following Jesus. Following Jesus

on a mission where they have no idea what is really involved. But they can't seem to resist. They leave vocation and home and set out at once. (My brother the commercial fisherman.)

It seems like when Jesus calls disciples, it's all or nothing. Immediately they leave everything. Which makes me think that we have to be careful. It may be too easy to hear these narratives of call, as calls to vocation only. If so, we might think they don't apply to us. You can demure by saying, I'm still in school, too young for choosing a vocation. Or if you are engaged in your vocation, you can say I have already chosen mine. Jesus wouldn't be calling me, I've already been called to a vocation. Or if you are retired you might say, well I'm past the vocational decision point so these stories of call don't apply to me either.

These are stories about vocation but they are stories about so much more. These are stories of God interrupting our every day lives complete with school, families, or on the job. And in the midst of our busy lives, Jesus has something in mind. Not away from our lives but right in the day to day.

Jesus says follow me. In the midst of all you are doing, yes. As busy as you are? Yes, even when the time is inconvenient. So that each day, we arise with new vision, new perspective looking for the one we are to assist.

God knows me to be a shirker. Coming upon the scene of an accident, I look to see folks on cell phones imagining that they don't need assistance because real help is on the way. But I have learned that God will keep calling. To the point that I must answer.

As God did on a recent very cold evening as I was leaving church in the dark. As I went to get into my car and a car had pulled into the staff parking lot almost blocking the way of my car completely. Inside were four young people in a car that had seen better days. One window was missing and the opening covered with plastic. A young man got out of the drivers seat to report that they had run out of gas going down Boston Avenue and they had pulled in the driveway. The car had died. How could I ignore them? They needed gas, but had no container. So, I managed to get my car pulled out and went home and got the lawn mower gas

can. I drove back and found them shivering in their car. The gas did the trick and their car started and off toward home they went. I am not sure who was more thankful, them or me. God won't smite us, just keep calling.

All of us are called and we can do this. You can do this. I can do this. We can be open, listen, and look. The opportunities will appear. Maybe not as clearly as they did to Samuel last Sunday or to Jonah or to Simon and Andrew, but they will occur. God calls each and every one of us. God's calls have been occurring to us all along. And they won't stop just because we are too busy or pretend not to hear.

Today more than ever, so much seeks to divide us. There are forces working to create and maintain estrangement between us. Yet, working together in the church is one way to work with people from different backgrounds with vastly different views and ideas. We can reach across what divides us and work together.

To do the work of God, we have to let go of some of the things that define us or offer us safety and security. Jonah, Simon, and Andrew sure did. We will have too also. But opening ourselves to discipleship not only opens us to relationships with those who are different from us, but there is more.

Not only can we form friendships with those of differing ideas and thoughts. But those friendships impact our view of the world. It turns out that tasks that seem impossible alone appear differently when faced together with a friend.

Researchers at UVA asked college students standing at the bottom of a hill while carrying a heavy backpack to estimate the steepness of the hill. The students who stood next to friends when asked the question as opposed to being alone or standing next to strangers gave significantly lower estimates of the steepness of the hill.

Together as we go forth from the church we can answer the call of God. We are called to share the good news. That God has taken on human flesh and come among us to show us the love of God. That God loves and cares for everyone. That God is a God of mercy. And in turn is calling us to share that love broadly and widely as well. Love God and love our neighbor, all of them, not just some.

One final story. I had the good fortune to have lunch this past week with a friend. We enjoyed lunch and pleasant conversation. As we finished our sandwiches, all of a sudden, my friend hung his head. His expression was despondent as sadness overwhelmed him. And he shared how he really feels. He is struggling with depression. Ever since Christmas he has been working with a team of professionals to overcome recurrent depression. Listening to him was a sacred time. I had no advice to offer, just a listening and concerned ear.

As we talked, he reminded of a saying that he uses to guide him through each day. The saying is attributed to Ian MacLaren: “A thought to help us through these difficult times: Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” My friend isn’t the only one struggling. While we pretend to be just fine, many of us are fighting hard battles. Battles of loneliness, addiction, sadness, stress, and loss. So, perhaps every person we meet during the day is really brought into our path as a call from God.

So instead of looking and listening for some dramatic call or vision, we should simply begin each day with an attitude of kindness. Being kind to each person whom God brings across our path. We may just discover that in showing kindness, we are really answering God’s call in our lives all along.