

Jonah 3:1-10

³The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-29

Callings: Following Religiously

I am a liturgical preacher. For those who already know my preaching style, you might have noticed that I follow the cycles of the church year with some consistency. If you are new to hearing me preach, what that means is that I see the church year in a succession of particular themes. If you look at the typical calendar you might hang in your house or office, the one that starts in January and goes to December – you might think about it in terms of holidays: Martin Luther King weekend, Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Easter, the 4th of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. However, the church calendar starts in December with the first Sunday of Advent, and then after Christmas and Epiphany, always goes next to Jesus’ Baptism and Call to proclaim the gospel. It is a logical sequence. Following the prophecies of the Messiah, and the birth of the Messiah – then Jesus receives the mantle of anointing in his baptism, and begins to live into the call God has placed on his life.

In terms we use frequently in the church now – Jesus claims his **mission** and begins his **ministry** by inviting others to join him. This language has been borrowed by business culture and personal improvement in the language of strategic plans. I’m not sure exactly who borrowed language from whom, but in my first call, one of my parishioners was a business professor at the Penn State Altoona campus who was uber-enthusiastic about entrepreneurship and gave me every servant leadership, or purpose-driven, mission-minded anything related book he could find. They were super popular in that moment. Bill was also the one who taught me to sing the refrain of

Here I am Lord as “I will go, Lord, WHEN you lead me.” When – instead of if, because Jesus leads, and we follow. He got that point across to me – as a young clergy-person, and I still smile and think of Bill every time I sing choose to sing it “wrong.”

Religiously following a calendar...

Religiously following a strategic plan...

Sounds super fun, doesn't it?

For many folks, that would indicate an incredible snooze-fest.

You might start wondering:

What's next Kerra? Are you going to talk about forming committees and sign us up for even more Zoom meetings?

No, but I am going to tell you that I recently had an administrative epiphany. I've been a Presbyterian just long enough to recognize that religiously following a particular path has been good for me. I like the predictability of a calendar that repeats itself week after week and year after year. Being shaped by the mission that Jesus lays out for us, his listeners, is life-giving. It shapes who we are, and allows us to imagine what we might become as a faith community.

Contrary to the popularity of all the books out there about leadership, Jesus didn't ask people to step up and lead, he asked them to *give up and follow*.

Let's take a look at what's going on in these few verses from Mark about Jesus' mission and Jesus' ministry. What does Jesus envision as his calling? And what does he invite Simon, Andrew, James, and John to do exactly?

In this text, Jesus makes a PROCLAMATION, in three parts.

Jesus' proclamation:

1-The time is fulfilled, 2-The Kingdom of God has come near, 3- Repent and believe

1) The time is fulfilled

The time is NOW – it always has been NOW

Jesus may have said these words in his own historical context, but they reverberate into every single historical context. If we want to hear the good news about God, perk up your ears and listen right now, right this moment. God loves you – right now. You don't have to look to the past for it. You don't have to wait for the future for it. God is available to you in the present moment. The time is fulfilled. THIS time is fulfilled. No looking back, no longing for. It's in the NOW.

2) The Kingdom of God has come near

The REALITY is HERE (Kingdom of God, not the Imperial Kingdom)

My dear clergy friends at First Baptist in Ashland talk more than I do about living into the Kingdom. Their theological heritage goes deeper than mine in imagining that one has

to separate oneself from this world enough to understand that God's world is the reality, the bigger picture. They have a better grasp, I think, on this proclamation of Jesus than I do. They can imagine God's Kingdom as near, graspable, obtainable. I tend to have a dimmer view of humankind perhaps with my Presbyterian heritage, not thinking that highly of my fellow human beings. And yet, I feel the hopefulness in their voices when they utter language that always sounds much like Jesus' prayer "thy Kingdom come."

3) Repent and believe the good news (Jonah)

In order to establish God's Kingdom in the here and now, or the now and here as Jesus orders it, one must repent, must turn away from the bad, in order to receive and believe the good news. This requires our sacrifice, our turning away from that which might make us a little too comfortable, or a little too arrogant in our own ways in order to accept God's ways.

This is the Jonah example. He is sent to call the big bad town of Nineveh to repentance. He doesn't want to do it. Like me, he has a strong pessimistic Presbyterianism that believes that their depravity is too far gone.

Gregg Levoy, in his book, "Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life" he goes deeply into the Jonah experience, the callings we say "no" to, and how we learn at times through our resistance. Let me share with you an excerpt on that:

When Jonah went overboard, he leapt not into the swallowing sea but into an unexpected benediction – the belly of the whale... The whale is a bit of inspired symbolism. The only

other time we are inside another's belly is before birth, so the image reflects the anticipated birth that follows sacrifice. In that belly, drunk on evolution, we are not so much acting as being acted upon by Something Bigger than ourselves. It is our preparation before we are spilled forth into life, into the world, ready at last to carry out our missions.

This is the second birth, the birth from above that some Christians will tell you is the only thing that will save you. In part, I hate to say it, but those Christians are correct. When we really repent from that which is holding us back from authentically who we are, and we turn away from evil, and turn ourselves toward the good – we are born into a place where we can hear this proclamation in full and then accept the invitation to which Jesus is calling us.

Let's hear that now:

Jesus' invitation:

1) Follow me

This invitation is indicative of Jesus' power, and it's insightful about Jesus' persuasion. To be a man who leads other men in that culture was a symbol of status and authority. However, Jesus wasn't claiming that status and authority for himself or for his ability to rise above and belittle others, he was claiming it in light of his mission, his proclamation. He's asking these men to follow with a particular mission in mind. That mission proclaims that God is here, now, and ready to invite us into a life of loving God, loving our neighbors, and loving all that we are and all that we might become in this world, because God is showing us to be here and now, in THIS WORLD.

2) THEREFORE: You will fish for people

Warren Carter – my current favorite biblical theologian is a fairly renowned expert on reading the gospel accounts of Jesus in the historical context of the Roman occupation. In his writing on these verses, he reminds us today that Jesus wasn't calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John from a recreational fishing trip, he was asking them to give up their business as the primary focus of their lives for something else. They were business fishermen, and it would disrupt their lives and livelihood to make this change, though the industry would simply replace them. That's what happens when you produce a commodity the Empire needs.

Here's the context they were living in. They knew already what a Kingdom was. Jesus didn't have to explain that to them. The Emperor was always touted as the most powerful person – to whom belonged all things on land or sea. They were fishing, in a sense, for the Empire. Their catch was inventoried, taxed, and sold before they saw any revenue from their ventures. Joining the Kingdom Jesus was describing would be a turn away from that. Jesus was offering a wholly different model for life. They would fish, not for the wealth of the Empire, but for the building up of God's Kingdom – a place of generosity, equality, and freedom. That's what Jesus was asking them to imagine, a mission and a ministry that would change their lives, but also have the power to change the world.

I know the liturgical calendar can get boring, and the idea of sticking with a strategic plan might feel administrative, or business-like – but there is a sense in which, in the middle of January, it's

a good idea for us to reinvest in this idea of being called to a very specific mission. We are called – called to meet God here and now. We are called – called to turn away from evil and to believe in the good – to believe that the world is good right now, and in this place. And then we are called to follow Jesus into this radical idea that even our very lives and livelihood are no expense too great when it comes to following Jesus. Let me reiterate, Jesus isn't calling ANY ONE OF US to step up and lead. He is calling us, first world – capitalist - living in the biggest military and economic powerhouse of the modern world - us, to GIVE UP AND FOLLOW.

We give up and follow so that our other concerns become secondary to living in the Kingdom of God. To find out more about this call, we do have to read further into the story. How does Jesus expect his disciples to follow? What does he teach them? What does he preach to them? How will he hold them accountable, ultimately, to the mission of God's love? This is the beginning of an incredibly powerful story, a journey that will consistently be described as one of bearing GOOD NEWS – even in world's like ours where the news will make you eat a whole roll of Tums to settle your stomach. I highly recommend this story. Five stars. It will make you want to be part of that mission and maybe even give you an administrative epiphany as well.