

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, January 21, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen
“How do you follow Jesus?”
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

both our Old Testament and Gospel passages today deal with how we follow God and how we follow Jesus; first, remember Jonah, the reluctant prophet?; when God tells him to go to Nineveh, where does he go?; in the opposite direction; he tries to run away from God!; only after he'd had a little time for reflection, after having being thrown overboard in a terrible storm out on the sea, and then some quiet time in the belly of a large fish (it wasn't a whale, by the way, because Hebrew has a word for whale and it is not used here), Jonah decides it might just be best to follow where God is leading him; see, today's passage is the second time God tells him to go to Nineveh; and, surprisingly enough, despite his reticence, when he actually does follow God's word, the Ninevites heed his prophecies and repent; this is a reminder that whatever we do, when we are following God, the results come more from God's power than from our willingness or our abilities

then turning to Mark, where we have another fish story; we see Jesus calling Simon and Andrew, people who fish, to follow him, in order to fish for people (and yes, that is a pun in Greek, so even Jesus had a sense of humor); what sounds similar to the Jonah story is that Jesus says he will “make” them fish for people; this sounds like they are only going to do it under compulsion, but that's not what's really being conveyed here; notice that Jesus is inviting them to follow him; that's their choice; that has to be their willing response; and if they do accept the invitation, what they will then be doing is fishing for people

to invite people who have been fishing, for fish, as their vocation, all their lives, to now change, and fish for people, is not compelling them to do something they would not otherwise do; it is just changing the purpose of their fishing; it is inviting them to do what they already know how to do, but to do it for Jesus' larger purposes; no longer are they fishing, for fish, to feed themselves and to earn enough to support their families; they are going to be fishing, for people, in order to feed the world with a new kind of sustenance: the food of God's love, as it is being expressed in new ways, by Jesus of Nazareth

now we don't have a record of the exact words that Jesus used when he called Matthew to become one of his disciples, one of his followers; but remember that Matthew was a tax collector; so we can imagine that Jesus used a similar invitation as he did with Simon and Andrew; Jesus might have said to him, 'Matthew, you are a person who collects taxes; follow me and I will make you collect people;' again, an invitation to redirect the purpose of his life

or similarly we don't have a record of the exact words that Jesus used when he called Simon the Zealot (a different person from Simon Peter, the fisherman) to become one of his disciples, one of his followers; the Zealots were a group of aggressive political agitators; our words 'zealot' and 'zealous' come from that organized group that Simon belonged to; Jesus might have said to him, 'Simon, you are a person who is uncompromising in pursuit of political ends; follow me and I will make you uncompromising in pursuit of spiritual ends;' and again, an invitation to redirect the purpose of his life

what about us, the current day disciples of Jesus, the current day followers of Jesus; doesn't he call us in the same way today?; my first professional job after graduate international business school was as a market research manager; what I did was figure out how to gather useful information and explain the importance of it in ways that people could use and understand; then I worked in insurance; what I did was figure out how to best protect what people considered valuable: their homes and cars, their health and financial investments; I'm still doing those same things today, but after my call into a vocation of ministry, of following Jesus, I have just changed the purpose of my work; I am still doing what I already knew how to do, but I'm doing it for Jesus' larger purposes; I explain the importance of religious information in ways that people can use and understand; and I'm helping people understand and protect what God considers valuable: their relationship with God, their relationship with other people, their relationship with their true God-given selves, and their relationship with God's creation

what about you, you current day disciples of Jesus, you current day followers of Jesus; doesn't he call each of you in the same way?; what is it that you already know how to do, whether from professional training, or from the natural gifts you have developed in your personal and family life, or from the spiritual gifts that God has given you?; Jesus has been inviting you to follow him since the day of your baptism; you don't have to be an ordained clergy person -- baptism itself is an ordination to lay ministry; what is it that he is inviting you to do for his larger purposes?; how have you, or how will you, heed his invitation to redirect the

purpose of your life?; as we prayed in our Collect of the Day today, “Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ” in the ways we already know how to do; every one of us has been equipped with our own way of answering that call; Jesus says, “Follow me” and I will make you do what you already know how to do, for my purposes