

## **Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2024**

Jonah and the whale. It's a favorite story from our childhood Sunday School classes. Jonah is called by God to go to a place he doesn't want to go to, because God wants him to straighten out the people of a city called Nineveh. He tries to get out of his obligation by sailing away to another place. It's sort of a silly response, because God knows all, including the location of Jonah. While he is at sea, a great storm comes upon the boat, and Jonah, knowing that this is God's anger and not wanting to see the sailors on the boat die, tells them to throw him into the water, and the storm calms down. Unfortunately, Jonah gets swallowed by a great fish – it's often translated as “a whale” – and the fish carries him to within walking distance of Nineveh.

And now, we are at the starting point of today's part of the story.

God tells Jonah again once again to go to Nineveh. He is to preach to them about how God is angry with their evil ways, and that God will destroy the city if they do not repent. Apparently, he's a very compelling preacher, because they immediately believe, and in repentance they fast and dress themselves in the clothing of mourning, sackcloth and ashes. And because of that, God decides to forgo destroying them all. Yay, Joshua!

There is something interesting about this story of a reluctant prophet. Most books of the prophets are all about what they say to the people to whom they're supposed to prophesy. The sum total of Jonah's prophecies is one-half of one verse in the whole book. This Book of Jonah is all about the relationship and conversation between God and Jonah.

It's about the vocation that Jonah tries to avoid, and how God uses different ways to get Jonah to commit to it.

We contrast it with the Gospel, where Jesus invites some fishermen, Simon and Andrew and James and John, to stop being fishermen and follow him, to be, as he poetically puts it, “fishers of people.” It’s an odd turn of phrase, because if these fellows were very literal, as workers like fishermen tend to be, they’d think “what’s the point of that?”

And yet they follow. They drop their nets. They leave their families. Immediately, that word I told you we’d hear in the Gospel of Mark. He has prefaced this call by telling people that it’s time to repent, because the kingdom of God is near. His cousin John the Baptist has been arrested, so if people have liked what they heard from John the Baptist, he’s saying that what John started he’s here to continue. Maybe that’s what convinces the fishermen to follow Jesus immediately. Maybe it’s the way he says it. If Jonah could convince the Ninevites to repent, certainly Jesus can convince Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. They accept the call that Jesus has extended, without a question or even a request to let their families know where they are going. Because something needs to happen, and it’s good news, and they want to be a part of it.

I wonder about these parallel calls to serve God. There’s the business with the fish. Jonah gets swallowed by a big fish, a whale, certainly because God told the whale to snatch Jonah so he doesn’t drown and then to spit him up on the shore where he’s near to his place of mission. The good news for Jonah is that whales don’t eat human beings, so he’s simply a source of indigestion to the beast. And look how fish play out in the Gospel! These folks make their living by fishing, for fish. Jesus invites them to be part of his work of fishing for human beings, to teach them about right relationship with our heavenly father. And they go.

Certainly, their being a part of Jesus’ mission is marked by all sorts of missteps and confusion. In Mark’s telling of Jesus’ story, it seems like he’s

continually frustrated by the fact that they don't seem to get it. And still he doesn't say "you boys are never going to understand, so I'm going to replace you with people who are smarter or more spiritually in tune with me." No, he hangs in there with this motley bunch, and leaves them to create the church of which we are now a part. There's a miracle, right?

But this calling by God to do something is a messy business, an imperfect one. Jonah is resistant because he's suspicious of "those bad people" in Nineveh. The disciples don't know if they have the gifts to do the work Jesus is asking of them. But eventually, they know they must do this, as Jonah knew it was time for him to get the work done.

That's the mystery of being called by God: you may be excited about serving God even though you don't know how to do it. You may be afraid because it will mean dealing with people who won't be receptive to what you bring them. You may want to stay in your comfortable life, your same-old, same-old existence, because new things make you nervous. But when God calls, you have to gird your heart and your spirit and do it, because you know God will keep on poking you to do it.

When I was called to the priesthood, there were a thousand reasons that I shouldn't say yes. I was at the top of my game professionally, doing work I really enjoyed. I was well-compensated for that work. Very well-compensated. The last of my children was about to go off to college and I was looking forward to being an empty-nester. My husband had married a lobbyist. He was the clergyperson in the family. Everything worked. But there was this nagging feeling that I was supposed to do something. I had held every position of responsibility in my parish as a layperson. But there was something more. And frankly, it terrified me. I couldn't imagine God would use me, because all I could see were my flaws and

my mistakes. It took me a long time of prayer before I even told my husband about it. Remarkably, he was fully supportive, despite the fact that I burst into tears every time I said the words aloud. I talked to a spiritual mentor, a priest who was my model of everything that a priest should be. I burst into tears when I told him. I did a lot of bursting into tears those days. But finally I realized that this was happening, and I should enter into a more formal process of discernment. And the tears abated, and a calm filled my heart. I didn't respond "immediately," as the disciples in Mark did. I didn't go sailing off on a boat to avoid it, as Jonah did. I was somewhere in between.

I imagine for most of us, God calling us to do something, whether it is changing one's professional direction toward ordained ministry or simply volunteering to do some work for God that takes us out of our comfort zone, is something we address in the same way. We are somewhere in between, wanting to answer God's call, not being sure we heard it right, wondering if we have the energy or grace...

...but God calls us, each and every one of us, to something. And embracing that call transforms us in myriad ways.

And that brings me to the work of Episcopal Church Women in this parish. These faithful people do all sorts of things – you'll hear a little about it during announcement time, when we commission the officers of the board. They organize fundraisers. They bake and cook. They get the word out. They gather things to give to those in need. They distribute funds to charitable organizations who need our support. They do this because it is how they live into God's call in their own lives and in their own hearts, and it is a beautiful thing to see.

Not all who are called by God end up in a whale's belly, thank goodness. Not all who are called by God become ordained, as it right and good, because lay

service is just as vital. Not all who are called by God are known to us. But they live into their call, somewhere between immediately and after a little prayer and soul-searching, and God says “that is Good News indeed!” And so do we – it is Good News indeed. Amen.