

"Responding to God's Call"

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

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Last week, our service and Adam's sermon focused on this idea that God calls each of us by name. That God sees us and knows us and plays an active role in who we choose to be and how we choose to be. This week, we're digging into the second part of that relationship: the ways we ourselves respond to that call. We'll start with a story about one of the most famous call evaders in scripture: Jonah.

As the story goes, God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, a city in Assyria where people were behaving wickedly against God. God wants Jonah to do something about it - to proclaim God's word and help these people find a different path. But Jonah is afraid and he flees. While he's on a ship, a fugitive from God, a terrible storm strikes and he's swallowed by a whale. He's in the belly of the whale for three days and three, I can only imagine, unbelievably smelly nights. He prays to God in his despair and promises to follow through this time, if only God will let him out of his whale prison. The whale spews him out on dry land, and here we find him, hearing God's call once again. Let's hear these words from the book of Jonah, the third chapter:

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So 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.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it.

May these words be to us our light and our life.

**Thanks be to God.**

We have here a story about a man who hears a call and runs from it, but finally responds with a wholehearted yes. Jonah is willing to take on this task of going to a place he fears, talking with people he fears, and taking on the work of transformation through the good news of a God who is all about that work. And where we leave this story, it seems like Jonah has succeeded. But if we look ahead into history, it turns out that the Assyrians, the broader group to which the Ninevites belonged, were the people who ultimately destroyed Jonah's home, the northern kingdom of Israel. When Jonah is in the whale's belly, at his lowest point and honestly desperate, he experiences a clarity he's never experienced before. He is transformed, and he goes to share that word of transformation with the Ninevites. But the Ninevites, while we hear that they believed and put on sackcloth and began fasting, did not experience the same kind of lasting transformation as Jonah.

What happens when we hear God's call and we heed it, but the results are nothing like we imagined?

Each one of us has been called by God. Ministry is far from the only call. A few weeks ago during coffee hour, we explored your calls. To law: first studying it, then teaching it, then forming new lawyers in their own calls. To astronomy: a story of a dark country night, a giant sky with infinite stars, and a call to learn everything about it. To teaching: discerning between college classrooms and birth-to-five exploration, supporting parents, watching young people grow. To parenthood: grappling with the long sleepless nights and the existential crises and the change in identity, and for it to all somehow be worth it. To partnership: the ebb and flow of a long marriage, strengthened and tethered by commitment and love.

Yes, these calls are strong and powerful and beautiful and fulfilling. But just like Jonah, these calls don't always turn out the way we planned.

I think about Civil Rights marchers in the 1960s. They exerted courageous power and strength, putting their bodies and lives on the line. They succeeded in so much: the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and most of all, the agitation of the American people to recognize the absolute necessity of transformation. And here we are, nearly 60 years later, seeing the rise of white nationalism and racialized terror, needing to do it all over again. Their call led to transformation - but there's still more transformation we are called to do.

I think about classroom teachers in the time of COVID-19. These open-hearted, diligent, courageous public servants give their lives to the growth and development of our young people. They spend their own money and take their own free time to create classrooms where all students can thrive. They craft creative lesson plans to respond to the needs of their

students and encourage not just learning content, but growing in empathy and social consciousness and civic engagement. Teachers change lives. But the past year has forced teachers to completely upend everything they are accustomed to doing. Reaching out to students who aren't logging into virtual sessions for a whole variety of reasons. Working to meet the needs of students whose home lives are unstable or unsafe. Putting in twice the work, and yet receiving so few moments of satisfaction they way they would in-person. Their call led to transformation - and yet they have been called to continue transforming without nearly the resources they need to do it.

What happens when we respond to God's call, when we seek transformation, but we find that the results are nothing like we expected? That's where I'll bring in our second text for today, a story from the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus calls his first disciples. A reading from Mark, chapter 1:

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

We hear that Simon and Andrew and James and John drop their nets and leave, as the story goes, "immediately" to follow Jesus. There must have been something so compelling to them about the call to fish, not for food for their community, but for people. They have no hesitation, as Jonah did. They just go.

And this metaphor of fishing sounds great at first. We are all seeking meaning and purpose, and by becoming fishers of people, these four disciples are planning to draw folks in with the promise of just that. Meaning and purpose. Real transformation. And just as fish are accompanied by so many others in their net, these folks are called to transform and be transformed in community.

But let's think about what actually happens when you go fishing. You drop your line or your net. You catch the fish. And then one of two things happens: you let the fish go, or the fish dies.

When we respond to God's call, we have to know that the outcome is out of our control. Sometimes we have to let the fish go. We have to surrender to the fact that God is God and we are not. The only thing we can fully control is our own transformation, our own response, our own willingness to listen and seek.

But also, when we respond to God's call, we have to be prepared to let some things die so that new things may be born in their place. It's the core story of our faith, the story of Jesus's death and resurrection. In order for real transformation to take place, we have to be prepared to say goodbye to the way things used to be. Just as Simon and Andrew and James and John said goodbye to their fishing nets, their families, and their inheritances, so too are we called to discern, what are we willing to say goodbye to in order to usher a new thing in?

Like many of you, I spent much of Wednesday watching the inauguration live and in replays. There is so much to unpack, and if you want to talk about the amazing coats and Bernie Sanders memes I am here for it, but the piece I want to focus in on for the moment is President Biden's inauguration address. His proclamation of a new era of unity is compelling. But I reject the notion that many have called a return to normal. There is no normal to return to, and normal didn't work for so many people. Instead, I see in this call to unity a call to be very honest about what must die in order for a new America to be born. I am quick to try to name these things in a grand, sweeping way, to point fingers, to get at the root causes. But I think my own call in this moment is to let my pride die. I want to invite a new humility and curiosity and tenacity and courage to grow in its place.

Amanda Gorman, youth poet laureate and recent Harvard grad and poet of this new generation spoke the words that convicted me in this call. She read in the conclusion of her inauguration poem, *The Hill We Climb*:

"So let us leave behind a country better than one we were left with. Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the West. We will rise from the wind-swept Northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution. We will rise from the Lake Rim cities of the Midwestern states. We will rise from the sun-baked South. We will rebuild, reconcile and recover in every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country our people diverse and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful. When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and

unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it."

Beloved, I believe that no matter where God is calling each one of us, it will require courage. It will require tenacity. It will require humility. It will require vulnerability. But within all of this, there is hope that by responding to God's call, we all, individually and collectively, might experience rebirth. May it be so. Amen.