

Sunday, January 24, 2021
Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Mark 1.14-20

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/893191158107420>

(Sermon begins at about 12:35)

“Immediately!”

“And immediately [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed [Jesus].” And then, when Jesus and his first two disciples come upon James and John, “Immediately he called them.”

Immediately. This is the tone of the call narrative in Mark’s Gospel. Yes, another Sunday of call narratives. Perhaps we hear so many call narratives in this season after Epiphany because Epiphany is about the ways Jesus is revealed to humanity. And while his identity as the Son of God, as God in the flesh, is most fully revealed in such events as his baptism and in some of his miracles, one of the ways that he is revealed is through the work of those whom he calls to be his disciples—of those he calls to follow him. And this side of the Resurrection, he continues to be revealed through those who follow him. Through those who are called to carry on his mission and ministry as the Body of Christ in the world.

As we examined last week, in the narrative from John’s Gospel about the calls of Philip and Nathanael, there are many ways to respond to the Divine call to service. Our lectionary for this third Sunday after the Epiphany continues highlighting the range of responses. This week in a particularly extreme way. On the one end of the spectrum, we have our Gospel reading, with its emphasis on “immediately” as a response. As the disciples’ response, but also as Jesus’ prompt to call yet more disciples. And then there is our Old Testament reading from Jonah, which is so radically different from our Gospel call narrative.

While today’s passage from Jonah is not a call narrative per se, the events described are the result of Jonah being called by God to be a prophet to Nineveh. A call which had a very different response than that of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. What we hear in our reading for today is the story of Jonah carrying out his mission to Nineveh. But what occurred before was a very different story. As you may recall, God came to Jonah and asked that he go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, Israel’s archenemy, and proclaim a message of repentance. Jonah really doesn’t want to do that. Instead of heading east to Nineveh, he goes in the opposite direction, to the Mediterranean seaport of Joppa, where he hops a ship bound for Tarshish. While we do not know exactly where Tarshish was, it was for the ancient Hebrews the farthest limit of the Western world. Probably the western end of the Mediterranean, if not actually beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. So, Jonah was so opposed to doing what God asked that he not only tried to get out of Dodge, he tried to get off the continent. And we know where that got him. In the belly of a great fish, which spit him up on the shore of Israel. After that ordeal, when God asked Jonah a second time to go prophesy to Nineveh, Jonah reluctantly agreed. Hence the passage we heard today. Again, a very different response to that of Jesus’ call to the first four disciples. And yet one more example of how when God calls, you better listen.

Because God will hunt you down, no matter where you run. God will dog you until you realize that there is no arguing with God, that there is no winning an argument with God. So, might as well make things easy on yourself, recognize who's the boss, and go along with God's calling.

Which brings us back to the Gospel. What does this narrative, this emphasis on "immediately," have to say to us about our own callings?

The thing that is intriguing to so many Biblical scholars and just about anyone who gives any consideration to the call narrative in Mark is the sense of immediacy. Which, by the way, tends to be a running theme throughout Mark's Gospel. Jesus as portrayed in Mark is all about getting on with it, about getting down to business, and about doing it now. Immediately. And we certainly see that in the calling of James and John, the second two disciples to be called: "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" (Mk 1.20). He didn't have to stop and think about it. He didn't have to do background checks or vet them in anyway. Although maybe he should have, as later he would nickname James and John "Boanerges"—"Sons of Thunder"—perhaps because of their fiery tempers. At one point, the brothers want to rain down fire on a Samaritan village when the inhabitants refuse to receive Jesus (Lk 9.54). Or maybe he should have vetted them a little better to find out how ambitious they were, because later on, they would come to Jesus and want to be given places of honor at his right and his left in the kingdom of heaven, to the dismay of the other disciples (Mk 10.35-45). All that aside, these two brothers obviously had other qualities that were of use to Jesus. We know that they, along with Peter, were the inner circle, Jesus' senior lieutenants who accompanied him in many situations where the other disciples were not in attendance. Most notably, the trip up the Mount of the Transfiguration near the end of Jesus' life. And it was John who would become the "Beloved Disciple," into whose care Jesus, on the cross, entrusted his mother. So, all in all, a couple of pretty good choices for trusted disciples.

While the word is not used, there is also a sense of immediacy in Jesus calling Peter and Andrew. We are told that he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, saw them fishing, and said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mk 1.17). Again, no stopping to analyze or vet the candidates. Jesus saw them and immediately knew he wanted them as his disciples. And here again, maybe some vetting would have been in order. Particularly for Peter. After all, as our write-up on Peter in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* notes, Peter is "often stumbling, impetuous, intense, and uncouth. It is Peter who attempted to walk on the sea, and began to sink; it was Peter who impulsively wished to build three tabernacles on the mountain of the Transfiguration; it was Peter who, just before the crucifixion, three times denied knowing the Lord. But it was also Peter who, after Pentecost, risked his life to do the Lord's work, speaking boldly of his belief in Jesus. It was also Peter, the Rock, whose strength and courage helped the young Church in its questioning about the mission beyond the Jewish community. Opposed at first to the baptism of Gentiles, he had the humility to admit a change of heart, and to baptize the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household."¹ Obviously, Jesus knew what he was doing when he immediately called Peter. For it would be Peter who would become Jesus' chief lieutenant, and who would go on to be the de facto leader of the Jesus Movement after Jesus' death: the foundation on which Christ would build his church (Mt 16.13-19). So, here again,

despite Peter's very humanness, he possessed qualities that Jesus was able to recognize and use for the furtherance of his mission and ministry.

That is one of the key messages from this sense of immediacy in today's call narrative. That Jesus is able to recognize qualities in people that are not readily apparent on first glance. After all, how could Jesus know what Peter or Andrew or James or John were really like, what they were capable of, what gifts they possessed that he could use? Just by watching them cast nets into the sea or mending nets in their boats? He was able to see into their hearts and recognize the true depth of their spirit, and what they could provide for the furtherance of the kingdom.

And that is what Jesus does with each of us. He is able to look into the depths of our hearts and souls and see who we really are. Warts and all. And despite the flaws and the imperfections, he is able to look beyond those things to see the essence of who we are. To see what gifts we bring that can be used in his service. To recognize just what we might be able to become, what we might be able to accomplish, if given half a chance. I don't know if I've told this story before, but if so, I think it bears repeating, because it points to the difference in the way we see ourselves and the way Christ sees us.

I remember a woman who attended the church I went to in high school. Her name was Scottie. Scottie was very faithful. She attended church every Sunday. She worked on committees and helped with various projects. Despite all this, she wouldn't become a member of the church. One Sunday after church, Scottie went out to the parking lot. She ran into my father, who had gone to the parking lot for a smoke. Seeing my father smoking completely changed her perception about what it meant to be a Christian. Here was a man who was an elder, a member of the board of trustees, a pillar of the congregation. And he was smoking. It turns out the reason that Scottie did not become a member of the church was that she was a smoker herself and she honestly felt that because of that, she could not join the church. She felt that because of her "vice," she was not good enough to be a member of the church. Her encounter with my father helped her to see God's grace and unending love, that all are welcome in the church, that all are invited into full membership in the Body of Christ, no matter who they are, what they are, or what they do. The following Sunday, Scottie officially joined the church and became a member of First Christian Church in Riverside.

We may not think something like smoking keeps us from God's love, keeps us from being called into Christ's service. But for Scottie, that was how she felt, which made it real for her. But there are so many of us who think that we are not worthy to be of service because of something about who we are or because we think we lack a certain something. But just look at the story of Peter. Just look at the story of James and John. They were hardly perfect. They were hardly the types of guys you would expect to be part of Jesus' inner circle. And yet, he saw something far deeper than what they were able to see. And so it is with us. When Jesus looks at us, he does not need to think about whether he can use us. Because he sees something in us that we are not able to see, even in ourselves. Something that he can use. Something that he can develop. Something that will be a benefit to him and to those we are called to minister to.

All that said, there is just one more lesson to be had in today's call narratives. And that is how we are to respond. When Jesus reaches out to us, when God reaches out to us, and calls us into

service, how are we to respond? I think you probably can guess the answer to that one. Immediately. As we see with Jonah, it doesn't do any good to run away. Because God will find you. Rather, recognize that when God calls us, it is not just for his purposes. It is not just to minister to others. It is also for our own benefit. All part of us growing into who God created us to be. Part of us growing into who God is creating us to be. So, the sooner we get started, the better.

Because, as Jesus says at the beginning of today's reading, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." The kingdom of God is happening all around us. There's lots of work to be done. So, we better get on with it. Immediately!

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Facts 2018*, Church Publishing (New York: Church Publishing, 2019), 46.