

**Sunday, January 21, 2024**  
**Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)**

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Mark 1.14-20

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2061620674203909>

*(Sermon begins at about 19:05)*

**“Responding to God’s Call Part 2: Discernment”**

As I noted in my sermon last week, the key Scripture readings for both last Sunday and today focus on how God and Christ reveal themselves to us through “call narratives.” Stories that focus on someone being invited or called into God’s service. In actuality, when you go back to the Sunday before last, to the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, the Gospel for that Sunday is also essentially a call narrative. Although, rather than focus on our response to call, it is really the story of Jesus’ de facto call to public ministry—the event that began his public ministry. So, we really have the first three Sundays in the season after Epiphany in which the focus is on call to ministry. Sending a pretty clear message that one of the key ways that God is manifest in Christ, that God is manifest in our own lives, is through being called into his service.

As you may recall, our readings for last Sunday contained essential three call narratives. The call of Samuel in our Old Testament reading and the calls of Philip and Nathanael in our Gospel reading. From these, we were able to glean some key characteristics of how God calls and how we respond. In terms of how God calls, we saw that God is, if anything, persistent; as he was with Samuel and Nathanael. We also saw that the way we are called into God’s service is as unique as we are. God meets us where we are in our own lives. He came to Samuel in the middle of the night in the tabernacle. Jesus ran into Philip on the road. God worked through Philip to invite Nathanael. And then we saw that there are differences in how individuals respond. Some are able to respond immediately, as did Samuel and Philip. And some need a little time or information, as did Nathanael.

This week in our Old Testament and Gospel readings we have more call narratives. While it may be harder to pin down a central theme for these narratives, one that could be made has more to do with the inner machinations that occur within the individual from the time they receive a call from God to the time they respond—be that responding “yes” or “no.” What we today refer to as the discernment process—exploring all the facets of the call as related to our own lives, and only then making an informed decision as to how to respond. But to get there, we need to dig a little more into the stories, as the discernment is not readily apparent on first reading. And as with last week, the two call narratives—the call of Jonah in our Old Testament reading and the call of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John in our Gospel reading—really couldn’t be more opposite.

Starting with the story of Johah, we have a story that, when you consider the entirety of it, really depicts how NOT to respond. What we hear today is only a small portion of the middle of the story of Jonah. As the passage opens, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” Remember from last week, God is nothing if not persistent. Let’s briefly look at what has

transpired thus far. God calls Jonah in Israel to “Go at once to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1.2). Jonah does not give God a verbal answer, but his actions definitely speak louder than words. Rather than head east to Ninevah, Jonah heads west to Joppa, a seaport on the Mediterranean, with the intent of hopping a ship to Tarshish, which is in southern Spain beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. Trying to get as far away from God as possible. Effectively saying to God, “forget you, I’m outta here. No way I’m going anywhere near Ninevah.”

We are never told precisely why Jonah does not want to do what God asks. Although speculations are that he was resistant to God’s call because he was being asked to go to Ninevah and get the people to repent and turn from their wickedness. That if he were not successful, God would probably wipe out the city or at least cause them a world of hurt. Jonah just was not willing to do that. Not because it meant a 500-mile trip over open desert. But because Ninevah was the capital of the Assyrian Empire—Israel’s arch enemy. Why would Jonah want to convince them to repent so they could be saved? Better let them stew in their own wickedness, let God smite them, and solve Israel’s problem of a more powerful enemy on their eastern border. So, Jonah runs in the opposite direction. To no avail. While at sea, a giant storm whips up. The sailors figure out Jonah is running away from God, so throw him overboard. Jonah then is swallowed by a great fish (not a whale) and sits there for three days until the fish spits him out, back on the shore of Israel.

So, in today’s story, God calls Jonah again: “As I was saying before your tantrum, I want you to go to Ninevah.” Which Jonah reluctantly does. And as we heard, he is successful. The people listen to Jonah, they repent, and they and their city are saved.

Not only does this story demonstrate the theme of God’s persistence, it also demonstrates that running away will not make the call go away. Coming up with all sorts of excuses will not make the call go away. Believe me, I know if what I speak. That’s not to say that we do not have a choice in how we respond. We do. That’s not to say that our own personal situations and perspectives shouldn’t be taken into consideration. They should be. Although it is to say that when God calls someone, God has a very good reason. We may not understand the reason. So, if we are reluctant to respond to God, knowing that God does not do anything without good reason, knowing that God calls people precisely because they have what God needs in that moment and in that situation, perhaps we need to take some time to discern what about us is making us reluctant to say “yes.” Why am I so resistant? God does give us time to do that work. Doing so in the belly of a fish is however, optional. And in all seriousness, that is why in our own time, we tend to do the work of discernment in community. To bring others into the process to provide different, more objective perspectives to be explored. So as to be able to make a more informed decision as to how to respond.

The call narrative in our Gospel reading for today is the complete opposite of Jonah’s. Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee and runs across Simon Peter and Andrew who are fishing. He says to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” They immediately drop what they are doing and follow him. No turning in the opposite direction. No delay. They follow immediately. They go on a little farther and run into James and John. Same thing. Jesus calls them to follow him and they do. Immediately. Now, this is a pretty strange response. Almost as

strange as Jonah's extreme delay tactics. Who in their right mind would immediately give up their whole livelihood to follow this itinerant teacher? What would motivate them to make such a radical, life-changing move? Rational people just did not do that.

Of course, we don't know for sure. We don't know if the four new disciples even knew Jesus before today. If not, that would be even more strange. Perhaps they did know him. Some scholars have noted that fishermen were considered among the lowest of the low when it came to professions. So maybe Peter, Andrew, James, and John were all sick of being at the bottom of the social ladder and wanted a change. But to give up a paying job to follow Jesus? How would they survive? Even if job dissatisfaction were an issue here, it just doesn't make a lot of sense.

The only plausible explanation I can think of requires a little scriptural analysis. After all, Mark typically presents basic, salient facts without giving a lot of backstory. Today's passage begins by noting: "After John [referring to John the Baptist] 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.'" So, it is clear that John the Baptist is now effectively out of the picture. Based on Jesus' message, Jesus was taking up John the Baptist's mantle, proclaiming the same basic message. Now, we do know from the account of John the Baptist in the Gospel according to John that before he was a follower of Jesus, Andrew—the very same Andrew who Jesus called in today's story—had been a follower of John the Baptist. And there is a scene in John's Gospel in which John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus walk by, says to Andrew and another of his disciples, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (Jn 1.36b). Andrew and the other disciple immediately left John the Baptist to follow Jesus.

Now, admittedly, Mark and John present different versions of how Andrew came to follow Jesus. But the point is, Andrew was a follower of John the Baptist. John the Baptist had noted Jesus was the Lamb of God, the one whom they awaited. And now John the Baptist is out of the picture. It would be logical for Andrew then to willingly follow Jesus upon being invited by him. To follow immediately. And, if Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist, what's to say that Peter, James, and John weren't, as well? And that they too were transferring from following John the Baptist's to following Jesus. Or, at the very least, if Peter, James, and John were not followers of John the Baptist, Andrew undoubtedly would have told them about his extracurricular activities in being a follower of John. Perhaps even told them about Jesus being the Lamb of God. So, you can start to see how, while their decision to follow Jesus may have seemed immediate, they were already primed. Already in a position that they had thought about making a career change to follow the one they believed to be the Messiah.

Here again, we enter the realm of discernment. To be willing to immediately follow Jesus, Andrew, Peter, James, and John would have already begun giving serious consideration to the trajectories of their lives. To how to live more fully into their passion to follow the Messiah when he was revealed to the people. Perhaps the four had even done some informal discernment together, preparing for this very day. So that when Jesus came along and issued the invitation, "Follow me," they were in a position to respond immediately.

Our two call narratives for today provide a stark juxtaposition as to responses to being called. When called, do we get wrapped up in our own personal positions, being unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture God is operating under; or are we willing to be open to discerning that bigger picture without being weighed down by preconceived perspectives or expectations? When we receive a call from God, do we run in the opposite direction hoping to outrun him, or are we willing to be open to possibilities for something new and life-changing?

The call process has two parts to it: God's invitation and our response. When we do receive God's call, rather than run away, we owe it to God to be diligent in our discernment and to carefully and prayerfully consider how we will respond. We owe it to ourselves and to God to take the time and do the work of discernment. Regardless of the final response, the end result will be more rewarding.