

Jan. 24, 2021

Sermon: Going and Coming

Lectionary year (B) 3 Epiphany

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; I Cor 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Last week in the children's message I talked about being on the receiving end of calls. How we are sometimes available to respond immediately to the caller and sometimes we are busy and push hold or mute until it's a convenient time to talk; or...we don't answer the call because we may not recognize the number, or perhaps, we *do* recognize the number, and we just don't want to talk to that person. Well, once again in our readings today from Jonah and in Mark's gospel, we have a few more in-coming calls and the response to those calls to go and to come, are as varied (different) as the people who are receiving those calls.

For Jonah today, God was once again calling him to speak a prophetic message to the people of Nineveh. Did you catch that? God was calling Jonah...again. *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second** time saying, "Get up, Jonah, and go to Ninevah, and proclaim the message I tell you to."* Now if you are at all familiar with the story of Jonah - you realize that it's a story filled with exaggeration and literary devices which stretch the imagination and provide us with a chuckle or two. After all, the first time God calls upon Jonah to speak words of repentance to the people of Nineveh, Jonah runs from God and ultimately finds himself living, for three days, in the lavish accommodations in the belly of a big fish! Essentially, we could say Jonah had put God on hold. Or perhaps, deleted God's call all together...or so he thought.

Now I can't blame Jonah. I'm not sure I would have liked the *interruption* of the call from God, either. Especially, since God was asking Jonah to deliver a message of redemption to the people of Ninevah. Nineveh! Of all places...the capital city of Assyria! Jonah is being asked to deliver a message of God's redeeming love to people who have been feared enemies of Israel! To

people...who have committed acts of violence! Why in the world would God want to save *them*? Why would God want to deliver *them* from their sinfulness? Why them? Why call him (Jonah)? Why...call us?

Despite the risk in speaking truth to an unruly and unfaithful bunch of people, God calls Jonah ...anyway. Despite the fact that Jonah is quite comfortable at a distance with the boundaries and prejudice he has created, God calls Jonah ...anyway. Despite the fact that Jonah's love of hatred and resentment and his misguided self-assurance that somehow...God's relentless love was meant only for "his" people, for "his" chosen people - God calls Jonah...anyway. Not Nineveh, not Jonah, and not us... are beyond the scope of God's love and grace and mercy. But hear me out: violence and lawlessness and vitriol hatred which destroys human life does not escape consequences - nor should it.

However, our own ability, or perceived *inability* to answer God's call in our *own* lives, is not about *us*. It's not about whom we have decided is in our club, or not. It's not about including or excluding whom we *think* is in God's club, either. It's not about having an exclusive claim on God's love, period. You know, one of the hardest verses in this comical, exaggerated, larger than life story of Jonah comes at the tail end of our reading today:

*When God saw what they (the people of Ninevah) did, how they turned from evil ways **God...changed his mind...***

You know, in my Hebrew Bible class last semester, we discussed this whole notion of God changing his mind - and it bothered me.

And quite honestly, it still bothers me a bit... until I reflect upon the times in my own life where God changed his mind and poured out his grace upon me. Going through a divorce was a painful experience and still is at times. When I look into the innocent faces of our two grandchildren today, there is the stark realization that some of the decisions made and some of the hurtful words spoken at the time, are not contained to just two people - or just one generation.

You see, some of the decisions we make as God's "chosen people" - some of our sinfulness, our own thoughts, our own words and our own deeds, are in need of an overhaul. We, too, may need to *put on sackcloth and sit in the ashes*, and bask in the love of the God who changes his mind. A God whose loving kindness and mercy towards God's creation is stronger than God's judgement. A God who hears the hearts of all his people when they cry out and a God who has us on speed dial. Now I can't say exactly when (or if) Jonah experienced that moment where an "epiphany" - you know, that *eureka moment* when Jonah realizes that God's overarching love is not only for him and "his" people, but for the people of Ninevah, too.

And of course, all call stories are different; yours, mine and four fishermen who cast their nets along the Sea of Galilee one day. Little did these four fishermen know - that when they set sail that morning, their lives would be dramatically changed by a call...**from Jesus**. Little did they know that this interruption in their daily routine would be an invitation to... **follow Jesus**. And little did the fishermen know - that when they abandoned their small boat, they would experience new life in a new community...**with Jesus**.

And a new community, indeed. A community which takes your hands and your exhaustion to help the weary, tend to the sick, and come to the aid of the oppressed; a new community which derives their identity not from their present economic condition or past familiar relationships; a new community where mercy and grace, love and forgiveness, repentance and renewal are the fundamental communal dimensions that form the inclusive kingdom of God.

You know... I wish, that when Jesus says, "Come, come after me and I will make you fishers of people," that it wouldn't require me to let go of the things I hold so tightly. Jonah was called to let go of his resentment. The four fishermen let go of their nets and released themselves from their family. Answering the call to discipleship is about being made new through God's redeeming love for all of

creation. It's about living in a community where the relational nature of the gospel is lived out *in us* and *through us*. Answering a call from God means giving...and receiving grace. And it's probably worth our while these days...not to put God on hold. Amen.