

Church of the Pilgrimage
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Follow Me

Today's message comes within the context of the messages we have been hearing all month. Today is the third Sunday of Epiphany. As you know Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th and it commemorates the magi coming from different parts to pay homage to the Christ Child. As you know it's deeper meaning is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles' meaning the babe born in Bethlehem was not just for people of a particular faith or a particular region; but for all people. The epiphany is the recognition of the divine, an illuminating discovery that creates a feeling of elation, awe or wonder. We know the wise men followed a star. These astrologers or kings as they are called knew something important had happened so much so that they journeyed great distances and brought gifts. Last week we celebrated Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. As you know Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister and social activist who led the US civil rights movement from the mid 1950's until he was killed in 1968 because of his work. As we know his work was for the emancipation of all people not just a certain group of people. As we know his work was about justice, the same justice Jesus speaks about in the New Testament. Today we hear about two call stories in our Scripture lessons. They show examples of people who are called by God and how they respond.

The sermon title is simple: Follow Me. The message is really for each one of us, in the living our our lives today. How do we respond? How do we live? Have you thought about what God asks of you? Not just in a generic way, as Christians we are supposed to behave in a certain way, love God above all else and love our neighbor as ourself, is one example. But what does God ask of you, specifically you? For many of us, our parents made the decision that we would be Christian when they brought us as infants to be baptized. So some of us our Christians by our birth rite. Some of us in our teen years may have been confirmed, we may have decided then that yes this is what I believe. The question today is when have you really stopped to discern what God asks of you? Not in a general way but specifically, what does God ask of you? And if we have discerned this question, (which I believe we continue to discern throughout our lives), what has been your response?

Let's start with our reading from the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah was written around 400BC. One Scripture scholar notes that the Book of Jonah was written to address the antagonism between Jews and Gentiles. Many official Jewish leaders looked more and more to the law and its observance as the essential element of their religious experience. This developed a sense of superiority and exclusiveness which tended to exclude all other nations from the circle of God's love and mercy. The Book of Jonah exposes this marrow

nationalism and shows the universal redemptive design of God for all people and all nations. The book's message was to remind Israel of God's world embracing love. The passage we heard this morning is about Jonah's call, we hear that it took God a second time to finally reach him. Scripture scholars write: the recovery of the prophetic office was not achieved through Jonah's personal merit, nor was there a real conviction on his part that he should comply with the divine directive. In the face of God's patient insistence, the prophet grudgingly obeyed. Jonah has learned at least one lesson: he could not escape or resign his commission at will. Jonah did not theologically accept God's purpose for his voyage, but he knew he must obey. And he did.

Our New Testament lesson from the Gospel of Mark is another call story. The call of Simon (also known as Peter), Andrew, James and John. According to Scripture scholars Jesus' call was strong and demanding, similar to a military order but with a personal touch in the use of the words "follow me". The call to discipleship is joined with an invitation to help Jesus in the task of capturing people out of the powers of evil and judgement so that they too may rejoice in God's new dominance over their lives. The response of the fishermen was immediate. They left their old vocation and became disciples. The verb followed was widely used to describe acceptance of Jesus' invitation to learn his way and to heed his teaching. In this passage we see that the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John came while they were about their ordinary, everyday tasks. They were in the midst of their normal routine, not unlike many of us. Jesus' request was really quite simple: follow me. He does not offer wealth, prestige, or notoriety, he simply states: "follow me". Whether Jesus had a sense these men were unsettled in their lives or looking for something more; we do not know. Was Jesus responding to a prayer they once uttered about knowing how to follow God or how to be faithful? We do not know. We do not know why they did follow Jesus.

We hear a bit different response than Jonah, he reluctantly followed, he knew there was no way to escape God or God's call. And God did not give up on Jonah. English poet Francis Thompson (1859–1907) wrote the famous poem entitled *The Hound of Heaven*. It describes: as the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and calm pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself, divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to God alone in that never-ending pursuit.

So we have many examples of call and how people responded. The wise men knew something was different and special, they went great distances to follow the star. Martin Luther King, Jr, took the message of the Gospel seriously and preached powerfully about it. Jonah was a reluctant follower but understood God would have God's way. Peter, Andrew, James and John followed immediately. What about you? How do you respond to God's call? Call or calling is one of the most common verbs in the Bible, with four basic meanings: 1. To speak out in a way of prayer. 2. To summon or appoint. 3. To name a person or a thing. 4. To invite people to follow the teachings of Jesus, the Way. All four meanings seem to fit as we discern our call from God. To discern God's call is a form of prayer, responding to God's call is a recognition that we are summoned by God and in inviting God into our lives, our lives are made more whole. When the first disciples followed Jesus, we know how that changed their lives and what they did. The first disciples proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom and they healed people. They brought a new perspective to how people saw life and they made people well. In many ways our call as Christians still does the same thing. We believe in something greater than just the mundane of this earthly existence, we have hope. We know there is more to life than the daily distractions and burdens that can weigh us down. We know there is more. We know life is meaningful, life is rich, people are precious. And when we live with that approach, people are made well, people around us do see things from a more hopeful perspective, and our lives are enriched even more. We are about God's intentions for this world. We are doing the work Jesus talked about, that is, bringing about the Kingdom of God. Our call is between God and each one of us. Leaders teach and help to show the way. It is up to each person to follow.

So what does following God mean for each of us? Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, writer and theologian. Some of you have heard this before, his definition of vocation is: It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work we are called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this, the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. In a life of faith, vocation is something different than a career choice. It's a summons and a gift from God. To discover what our call is takes some listening. It is God turning toward us and our turning toward God. Jonah was running away and God turned him around. Those fishermen heard the call and abandoned everything. Maybe you don't feel particularly called. Then consider how you use your gifts in following your faith.

I would identify three things needed to be able to follow: 1. We need to know who the leader is that we are following. If someone were to look at our life, who would they say our leader was? If we looked at where we spent our time it might be at our work place. If we looked at where we put our energy, it might be in raising our families. If we looked at where we spend our money, it might be in our houses. Who do we identify as our leader? Is our leader our spouse or significant other, our neighbors and friends, the Jones' (keeping up with the Jones), is our leader our minister? In order to follow God, we need to have God as our leader. 2. We need to commit ourselves to the Christian life. This involves acknowledging the God within us and letting that power change our lives, if needed. It means that every action in our life is being about God's intentions for us. If we know what the right thing to do is, then do it; don't wait for the timing to be more convenient. Don't wait until you have enough time, there is never enough time! Make a commitment to God. Commit your lives to God. Don't worry about how – that will be made clear. Remember all those things learned in Sunday school about being a Christian? Live them because they are real. 3. To follow means to respond, means to take action, means to actually do something about it. This may be different for each person, that's okay. It may also mean starting small, that's okay. To live a Christian lifestyle does not mean we have to be a monk or a hermit or Mother Theresa. To live a Christian lifestyle means we need to listen to the voice of God we hear and say "here I am, send me", then as we are directed, it means following – even when it is not convenient or when we are too busy or when we do not have enough time.

Living a life of faith means we are enabled to care for people, we are enabled to help those in need, we are enabled to reach beyond ourselves, we are enabled to take the side of the marginalized, we are enabled to be for the "underdog" if you will. It is not based on our will alone, that we can do these things, it is because of God. In addition, what this message of Christianity is saying is that it is not possible to be a Christian only one day a week. By definition, to be a Christian means being for the other, living a life of service – everyday. I have had people say to me, I am not good enough, I am not worthy, my life isn't anything great. It really is not a question about how you see yourself (though if you see yourself in a positive light it may be easier!) It is more knowing and believing that God loves you and thinks you are special and uses you to touch people's lives and believing that this is true and living your life according to this belief. It's not saying you have to be holy or pious even. But we do have to have an open heart and a willing spirit to be about God's business in this world today. And our world needs us! There is much brokenness and pain we can do something about.

This is what helped me, you've heard me say it before, it's what my Mother told me when I was trying to figure out how I could serve God: from John Henry Cardinal Newman, God has created me to do some definite service. God has committed some work to me which God has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of

connection between persons. God has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do God's work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my place. Therefore, I will trust God. Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away.

We have many examples of call and how people responded. The wise men knew something was different and special, they went great distances to follow the star. Martin Luther King, Jr, took the message of the Gospel seriously and preached powerfully about it. Jonah was a reluctant follower but understand God would have God's way. Peter, Andrew, James and John followed immediately. What about you? How do you respond to God's call? Jesus extends an invitation to each one of us today: follow me.

Amen.