

Will You Answer the Call?
Jonah 3:1-5,10 & Mark 1:14-20
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Page | 1

How many of you have special ringtones for special people in your life? Some of you are laughing about special ringtones, saying, “Meh, I’m not worried about how the phone rings!” How many of you remembered to turn your cell phone off before this service started? Some of us keep our phones turned off most of the time, so that our lives are not constantly interrupted by noise. If I notice the vibration, then I am free to answer. Otherwise, I will check my phone about every two hours for messages and call back. My mother cannot understand how I can let the phone ring. She answers every call, although she is now learning that is often rude to interrupt one call (or to interrupt the conversation with the person in front of you) to answer your call. Usually it can wait.

What about calls from God? How do they come? One hymn writer reflects: *God is calling through the whisper of the Spirit’s deepest sighs, through the thrill of sudden beauties that can catch us by surprise. Flash of lightning, crash of thunder, hush of still-ness, rush of wonder. God is calling. Can you hear? God is calling, can you hear?* So hearing the call of God requires careful attention to the Spirit’s nudges, awareness of the beauty and awesomeness of the world around us.

Mel Bringle, the writer, goes on to say that *God is calling through the voices of our neighbors urgent prayers, through their longing for redemption, and for rescue from despair....* So hearing the call means listening to others, hearing their need and responding.

Jonah didn’t. At least not at first. God wanted Jonah to let the people of Ninevah know of their mid-guided ways. Jonah figured this was an unpleasant task, perhaps even dangerous. Who wants to tell someone that! So Jonah ran, as we heard in the children’s message. But the part of Jonah we read now is when Jonah repents and decides to listen to the word of the Lord.

As a preliminary to hearing this middle part of the story, think about this, Jonah, being unwilling to fish for people, running from God, got fished by the big fish. So it's not fish or cut bait. It's fish or be fished. This is a funny story – don't take it literally or you'll miss the point.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (NRS)

The important message all through Jonah is that God is merciful. God is merciful to Jonah, even after Jonah runs in the wrong direction. God is merciful to the people of Nineveh, even after they run in the wrong direction. And God is merciful to us, even when we run in the wrong direction. Jonah gets mad about God's mercy. Many of us get mad about God's mercy. We think people should be deserving of grace, deserving of help, but God just gives it to all of us – deserving or not.

There are still Christians who prefer the message of condemnation to the message of grace. Yes, God judges our sin because God gets the bird's eye view of our life and knows what it does to us and others. God wants us to stop running in the wrong direction – not because God desires to exact punishment on us or to prove to us that we were wrong, but to get us going in the right direction, simply because it is right and good and best for us and others. That's what Jesus came to show us – how to live and live abundantly and peacefully.

Notice in this story, how much easier it is for the disciples, because the Word of God comes in flesh and blood and says, "Follow me." In the presence of the living God, the disciples responded immediately. (video of Mark)

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (NRS)

"See ya, Dad. We're going with this rabbi." They did not know where they were going. Did they understand the analogy, fishing for people? They must have had some notion of capturing the hearts, minds, and souls of people. They were taking the first step forward without seeing the staircase. That's faith, according to Dr. Martin Luther King. "Faith is taking the first step forward when you cannot see the whole staircase." What's involved in fishing for people? Where are we going? How long will we be gone? Will Dad be okay without us? He's got his employees. I can imagine Zebedee supporting this decision. "Go, my sons, find out the truth from this teacher. Leave me behind. I'll take care of the family." Surely the presence of Christ was compelling to all who followed him, as the crowds seemed to gather wherever he went. They came to him for his wisdom, for his healing, for his loving-kindness.

Sometimes people will say, "I'm not sure how to follow Jesus because you know, it's not like it was in the first century. I don't have Christ standing in front of me." No, you have something even better. You have the Spirit of Christ living in you – going with you wherever you go.

When we have trouble hearing the voice of God guiding us with a particular decision, it is most likely due to the fact that we are not constantly cultivating an openness to God's will. Can't you hear Jonah talking to the guys on the boat? He's saying, "I don't know. I've been praying and trying to figure out what God wants me to do, but I just can't get a clear message from God." From the belly of the fish, you can rail against God if you want, but deep down in your soul, you know how you got there, and it wasn't God's fault. No, it is God who gets you out of that sticky situation, and gives you another chance, and another chance, and another chance to do what is right, to pay attention to the whispers of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit in your head is like that really quiet person in a meeting when all the boisterous people are talking non-stop. "Oh, here's what we need to do." And another interrupts and says, "No, wait. Have you considered this?" And another pipes in and says, "Really, let me tell you how it is." And all those competing loyalties are sounding off in your head, and nobody in there is listening for the quiet voice of the Spirit.

Mother Teresa says, "God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening in the beginning of prayer." Pope Francis says, "Obeying God is listening to God and having an open heart to follow the path that God points out." It is a challenge to listen to God. There are so many voices going off in my head – even if when I put my cell phone on silent and ignore my email. Since returning from Montreal on January 8, there have been so many things to work on, so many people to see, so many meetings to orchestrate. Friday I stayed home all day to find the silence required to listen to God as I worked on the memorial service and this sermon. I've been battling with myself, trying to listen to God about whether to go on this mission trip to Haiti. Craig Hardesty is going, both Eirinn and Cormac Camphire are going. Richard wanted to go, and his work schedule will not permit it. I feel called to go, but in the feverish pitch of the last two weeks, I have not been able to see the way clear. I've been praying for direction. Am I quiet enough to hear God's voice? If you cannot get everything done, your life is too full, then stop doing stuff and be quiet with God.

Not every answer can be “yes, sure, I’ll do that.” No, we must make choices about which times to go, to add another responsibility and which times to stay where we are. “Whether I hear God’s call or not depends on the condition of my ears, and exactly what I hear depends upon my spiritual attitude.” Says Oswald Chambers.

There are the big call moments related to vocation – as Mary Oliver puts it...“Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” There are many big decisions along the way – what to study, where to work, whom or if to marry. Frederick Buechner wisely said of our vocation, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

In addition to the large vocational choices, there are daily choices of going or not going with God. All these many small decisions make quite an impact when you stack them all up. Will I do what I know to be right and true and faithful – just today? Will I make some quiet time with all screens off to listen for God’s voice? Will I approach this day with awareness of who is in charge of my life? And it’s not me! Will we accept when our plans are thwarted and be on the lookout for God who may be aiming to teach us something? God’s ways are higher than our ways. God’s vision is much better.

Since tomorrow is our first gathering of Peace Poetry group, I want to end with a Mary Oliver poem on Praying because I believe this speaks of the kind of attentiveness that our spirits must give to God’s Spirit – for us to hear God calling.

It doesn’t have to be the blue iris, it could weeds,
in a vacant lot, or few small stones; just pay attention
Then patch a few words together and
don’t try to make them elaborate, this isn’t a contest,
but a doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another may speak.