

January 25, 2015

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 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. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." 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.

Psalm 62:5-12 (6)

5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Selah) 9 Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. 10 Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. 11 Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, 12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29 I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

14 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.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

As I learned to read, one of my favorite genres, one of my favorite kinds of books, was the choose your own adventure story. At the end of each chapter, you got to choose the character's feelings or actions. Information was intentionally left out for the reader to then guide the narrative. You got to tell the character what they were thinking or what to do next. This gave budding bibliophiles like me a chance to test out what it is like to become an author, to see how causes and effects relate to one another in the development of a story.

There are times when we seem approach Scripture in the same way. When information is left out of stories, we sometimes add our own flair to the content of the story. When an ending is unknown or details seem omitted, we make a conjecture about the otherwise ambiguous future opened to us by Scripture.

We had a wonderful lectionary study on Monday this week, and let me tell you all what a blessing it is to have your voices, your perspectives, add to the depth of sermon preparation and worship formation here in this congregation. And how appropriate is this, that the worship forms of our community reflect the hopes, the struggles, and the faith of our community in relation with the God of all creation.

But at this lectionary study, one of the things that we noticed was that today's Gospel seems to leave out lots of important information. In fact, as an author Mark is known for this. You'll notice that twice in just seven verses Mark uses the word *immediately*. Rather than spend time on narrating details of space, of feelings, of relationships, Mark drives the story forward to follow Jesus as he blazes the path of reconciling all things to God.

Even so, Mark's immediacy leaves us questions. Lots of questions. For just one example, James and John leave their father Zebedee – and what a great name that is, Zebedee – but they leave Zebedee, along with the hired servants, in order to pursue this person of Christ. What about the family business?

What did Zebedee think of being left behind? There's so much we don't know!

Some assume Zebedee must be distressed at this sudden departure of his sons. Left alone to handle the human resources, the finances, and the hard labor all by himself! No goodbye to their mother, so he must be frustrated. And who is these Jesus guy they're following? Sounds suspicious to me... And they didn't even finish mending the nets!

But we get none of that. None. What if he had an entirely different reaction? What if Zebedee gave his blessing? What if this father saw in Jesus the liberation of Israel? What if he sent his sons away from these nets, because he can fix these holes in the nets,

in order to see his sons come alongside of God's redemptive work? We just don't know.

Some of this creative conjecture offers us a chance to delve into the narrative of Scripture, to take hold of God's word as our own story. But, if we let it run to far afield, or even worse, if we let our additions become the dominant biblical voice, we miss the trajectory that God set before us. And in this case, we can miss the blessing of Mark's immediacy.

You see, there's actually a rationale for why Mark leaves out all of that detail. All those nonexistent features, the absent information, is simply not a part of the story he's telling, not central to the Gospel. During our lectionary study, one of you brought out this key point: in Mark, what's left out is not important

to the narrative because the story is about following Jesus. The information that is left out is not essential to Mark's story. Rather, he wants us all to see that, like James and John, we are called to leave the comfort of our ordinary lives for the commission of God's Gospel. The questions that we're left with, then, is not what Zebedee thought when James and John were called away. Instead, our question is this: when Jesus calls us, what are we called to leave behind?

This, of course, is a much more difficult question. We can sort of academically ponder Zebedee's feelings about his sons' departure to become disciples of Jesus, but when we have to consider the vast changes in our own lives, the difficulties in the shifted relationships, then we're met with the

uncomfortable reality that the presence of Jesus requires holistic changes, not just for James and John, but in our lives as well.

This might mean leaving lucrative opportunities. For James and John to leave their nets was to leave stable work, to walk away from a respectable profession, to deny a job that contributed to the thriving of society, all in order to follow the call of Jesus. But Jesus wouldn't call *us* to that, would he?

For James and John, they not only left a family business, but the family. Not only did they leave Zebedee, but with leaving their father they also left behind whatever other families they had – mother, siblings, spouses, children, everyone. All to be close to

Jesus. But Jesus would never call *us* to that, would he?

One of the great sicknesses in our theology today is that we assume God doesn't ask anything difficult of us, that the Gospel is not difficult to live in our lives, that grace is somehow cheap. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, grace is a costly thing. Grace requires a cross, both the cross of Christ and for us to bear our crosses and follow Jesus. When Jesus comes to us and says, "Come and follow me," there is a promise within that invitation: if you truly come, if you truly follow, then nothing will ever be the same.

Perhaps the transition of our worship space helps to contextualize Mark's immediacy. At some point, together as CLC, y'all decided to make a change in

order to continue ministry in the 21st century. Moving from chairs to pews, making the space flexible and more usable, updating the sound system, this all required following Jesus in the belief that whatever he has in store for the future is worth the kinds of change necessary to spaces we know and love. With this space now a week away from hosting Across the Spectrum for the first time, we're beginning to see how Christ's call to follow him into hospitality is a change for the good, a change for the Gospel.

But even more than a building, the kind of call to follow we find in Jesus requires challenges to our own sensibilities. We tend to believe our money is our own, but to follow Jesus means to admit that all that we have comes from God, that all of our resources

become directed at Gospel purposes. We tend to believe our bodies are our own, but to follow Jesus means to admit that we are the images of God, that our very identities and therefore the entirety of our purposes belong to God.

When Jesus says, “come and follow me,” Jesus calls us to leave what we’ve done and instead pursue a world built around what God has done for us. Today we heard Jonah’s prophecy to the city of Nineveh – present day Mosul in Iraq – and the miraculous transformation that God brought to that great city. What we don’t see is that Jonah initially carried a terrible prejudice against the Ninevites. You see, Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, the first empire to conquer parts of Israel. The exile of Israel

began with deportation to Nineveh. Yet, God said to Jonah, “come and follow me,” follow to a place where I have a great purpose in mind: turning your most hated enemies into sisters and brothers in God’s kingdom.

This is why Jonah ran to the other side of the known world. This is why Jonah fled from God’s commission to come and follow, because following Jesus means that your adversaries just might become your friends, that you just might be called to love your enemies and bring to them the good news of salvation.

Also what we don’t see in this story is that Jonah’s tomb is also in Nineveh. Though he initially fled from God’s call to come and follow, tradition suggests that

Jonah not only carried the prophecy to Nineveh. He apparently lived out his life alongside these people, helping them to turn from evil toward God, and died amongst them as a brother in faith. When God spoke to Jonah, “come and follow me,” Jonah’s life transformed from prejudice, to prophet, to a citizen priest in the midst of the people he initially despised but eventually became his family of faith.

This, THIS is the kind of radical shift that comes when we hear the call to come and follow Christ. The point of Mark’s Gospel is not the information that isn’t there. It’s the very words we hear from Christ. Come and follow me. Yes, that means changes to your occupation. Yes, that means changes to your family. Yes, that means changes to your preferences and

prejudice and in every conceivable part of us. It is a difficult transformation. But like Jonah, it is also a beautiful change, shifting from violence and division and fear into love, radical love, inescapable love.

Jesus says to each of us, "Come and follow me," and never be the same. Amen.