

Third Sunday in Epiphany  
January 21, 2018

Dr. Susan F. Dewyngaert

**Mark 1:14-20**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

**“Are You on a Mission from God?”**

*And the people of Nineveh believed God;  
they proclaimed a fast, and everyone great  
and small put on sackcloth. -- Jonah 3:5*



“Jonah and the Whale” by Frank Samson, contemporary

Is anyone old enough to remember *The Blues Brothers*? In the ‘80s John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd played Jake and Elwood Blues. After Jake is released from prison, the two go on an ill-fated odyssey to save the Catholic orphanage where they were raised. They blunder and plunder their way through a series of larcenous schemes. Through it all the two consistently announce:

“We are on a mission from God.”

As if that made all the illegal fund-raising and general criminal activity all right. On a mission from God? No. Jake and Elwood were just a couple of con men, but we laughed at them. Seriously, I am NOT recommending this movie.

But what about the idea of being on “a mission from God?” What’s the possibility that an honest person, a regular person could be picked out for some holy purpose? Simon, Andrew, James and John were as regular as they come; they were working at ordinary jobs, doing the regular thing when the word of God came to them. What happened next was not spectacular, but ordinary.

*Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw them... [and] said ... ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

Robert McAfee Brown, a great American 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian wrote, “There are little moments when vast things happen.”<sup>i</sup> Little moments when we are called to serve – called to serve the Winter Relief guests, or the third grade Sunday school students, moments when we are summoned to comfort the sick, or visit those in prison. You and I hear the call of Christ to “come and follow.” Immediately we drop our nets. At least I hope we do. Because what happened back then still happens in our time -- in everyday settings, to ordinary people.

It’s worth noting that while what these fishermen were doing was ordinary, Jesus’ behavior was not. In that day rabbis did not usually go around calling disciples. You had to apply to be a disciple – something like the way we apply to schools today. You had to show credentials. You had to be screened to make sure that your academic and political background measured up to the

rabbi's exacting standards. After that the rabbi would choose the best and brightest for his disciples.<sup>ii</sup>

But not Jesus. Jesus seems to believe that anyone can be on a mission from God.

What do you think?

- Can the checkout clerk at the grocery store be on a mission from God?
- Can that neighbor who takes care of your dog when you're out of town? Could he be on a mission from God?
- Can that annoying woman who constantly calls from the PTA be on a mission from God?
- How about your teenage daughter, with her room filled with giggling girlfriends; could she be on a mission from God?
- And how about someone with bills to pay? Kids to shuttle? Dinner to make? Two doctors' appointments this week, and a garage to clean out?
- How about someone with an early meeting tomorrow morning?

Yes! All of those people may very well be/can be on a mission from God; because God can use anybody – even you and me. Take the story of the prophet Jonah, for example. The word of God came to this strange little man, a man, according to Fred Craddock, whose “faith was troubled, sometimes divided, full of impurities and difficulties, [the] source of a great deal of pain as faith can be, as hope can be, as love can be, a faith much like our own.”<sup>iii</sup>

How do Jonah's story and the story of Jesus' first disciples help us understand what it means to live authentically in God today? Jonah's is a bizarre story really. I can easily imagine either Dan Ackroyd or John Belushi playing Jonah, the prophet, Jonah the son of Amitti, preacher in Israel, who received the call of God to go and preach in Nineveh, a great and wicked capital city of the Assyrian Empire, located near Mosel in modern-day Iraq.

This was surely Jonah's worst nightmare. Jonah is a Hebrew ... and the Ninevites? Jonah and his countrymen had been carefully taught to hate Assyrians. As Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein sang:

You've got to be taught before it's too late  
Before you are six or seven or eight  
To hate all the people your relatives hate  
You've got to be carefully taught.<sup>iv</sup>

The Hebrews hated the Assyrians the way North Koreans despise the United States today. These people were the enemy, no exceptions. But God said, “Jonah, I want you to go at once to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”<sup>v</sup>

So Jonah, a faithful servant of God, dropped his nets and went immediately to Nineveh to do the Lord's work. Not so much! Like all the rest of us, Jonah didn't like to be told what to do. He didn't much want the Ninevites saved from destruction. He wanted nothing to do with any of it. So instead of fulfilling God's command, Jonah caught the first ship going the other way, to Spain, under the mistaken impression that it's possible to run from God.

There was a huge storm. The sailors called on their various gods for help, and they cast lots to find out who was responsible. Jonah was bullheaded and cranky but he wasn't dumb. He figured out what was going on, confessed what he had done and got himself tossed overboard. So... God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. In the belly of the great fish, Jonah prayed a beautiful, heartfelt prayer. Really, it is worthy of the Psalms of David. After three days, the fish belched Jonah out onto dry land.

That's where we pick up the story with our lectionary text for today. Listen to God's word from the book of Jonah, chapter 3, beginning at verse 1:

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And Jonah cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said he would bring upon them; and did not do it.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I know. It sounds a lot like a fish tale. But remember, story and metaphor are THE way our ancestors communicated the truth, no matter how much our scientific, post-enlightenment minds want to rebel against it. As the Native Americans say, "I don't know exactly how it all happened but I know it's true." And Jonah does appear to have been an actual, historic person. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14 as having spoken the word of the Lord during the reign of King Jeroboam, which would make him a contemporary of Amos and Hosea.

I don't know how this whole thing went down with the fish. I do know that this strange little man finally ended up in Nineveh and preached there. The Bible doesn't give us much detail at all about what he said, but we know that Jonah was a man of deep faith.

Fred Craddock wrote:

*"His faith was deep, exodus deep ... Israel deep. He had the faith of his parents and his grandparents ... all the way back to the beginning. He was a man who loved his country and was faithful to its institutions. ... That's his faith. A faith that was deepened and confirmed with every [anti-semitic slur] ... His faith was full of 'My Country 'Tis of Thee.' The most favored nation; that's his faith."*<sup>vi</sup>

I don't think Jonah realized how much nationalism was stuck in his faith, just as I am not aware of mine; you are not either, I expect. It's like the cartoon Pastor Nancy showed last week of Jesus' complaining about all the blonde haired, blue-eyed images of him. I mean, how many blonde, blue-eyed Middle Easterners do you know? That's our *pentimento* showing. That's a

word I just learned; it's an art-term. When an artist changes his/her mind and decides to paint over something, *pentimento* happens when traces of the original painting bleed through. Fred Craddock wrote that every one of us has some *pentimento* in our faith. There's a bit of racism, or sexism, or homophobia that bleed through when we least expect it.

Jonah's did. Yet God saw fit to send him on a mission anyway, "Go to Nineveh, that great city." Apparently God can use even *pentimento* people.

Go home and read the whole story of Jonah this afternoon if you can. It's very short. What you'll find is an odd and very funny story. The story of Jonah is a comedy. You know what? Jonah's attitude regarding the Assyrians never improved. The whole story reads something like a Saturday Night Live skit. After the fish barfed him up on the beach, he stood on the beach covered in seaweed and gunk. He went into the city crying for the people to repent, demanding that the Ninevites repent. Do you think Belushi or Aykroyd could have done something with that role? I can imagine either one of them declaring, "I'm on a mission from God."

But here's the shocker. It happens. They do repent! All of the Ninevites, from the king to the animals in the fields. They repent of their evil and God relents and does not destroy the city. Who saw that coming?

I have to admit that I don't like this message. If anyone in this story needs to repent, it's Jonah. Prophets are not supposed to despise their neighbors. But no. The story ends with Jonah sitting under a bush with his arms crossed saying to God, "I knew it! I knew it. THIS is why I didn't want to come to Nineveh. I knew that you would love these people and forgive them and accept them." What kind of mission from God is that?

The only kind God seems inclined to sponsor, I think. Like the four uncredentialed fishermen Jesus called by the Sea of Galilee, God seems to enjoy blessing and using the strangest kinds of people. Even the likes of you and me.

A few years ago I read a book by Marj Carpenter, the former moderator of our Presbyterian Church, USA. Marj is a journalist and church historian, and she wrote copiously about Presbyterian missions, at home and around the world -- in places of need from Baltimore city to Malawi. Marj remembers that Presbyterians have been on a mission from God since the beginning. There have been more Presidents of the United States that were Presbyterian than any other faith group except Episcopalians. Ronald Reagan, Dwight Eisenhower, Woodrow Wilson, James Buchanan, James K. Polk and many others were Presbyterians including Andrew Jackson, the president who was not only an unrepentant slaveholder but ordered the mass deportation of Native Americans called The Trail of Tears.

Marj wrote: "Presbyterians in the Civil War risked their lives in the North running the Underground Railroad; Presbyterians in the South fought for slavery." Like Jonah we're all a mixed bag. I learned only recently that, "some Presbyterians walked alongside the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears."<sup>vii</sup> They were the only ones who did that. They were on a mission from God.

How about you? You have your pentimento and I have mine; we all have work to do – to overcome our prejudices, to understand – but there is only one God, one God of the whole earth. That one God’s greatest joy is to love, restore and forgive, even our enemies, even you and me.

I’m on a mission from God, and so are you.

There’s a story that the rabbis tell about the exodus. At the time the Jews were delivered from slavery in Egypt, God was very busy. So God appointed a committee of angels to take care of the Red Sea. And so when the Israelites arrived at the sea, using the power of God, the angels parted the waters. The Israelites went through. Then the Egyptians came with horses and chariots. The angels waited and when they got to the middle of the sea, they released the water and the Egyptians went tumbling and drowning.

The angels clapped and sang and God came by and said, “What’s all the celebration?”

“We got ‘em!

We got ‘em!” The angels sang.

And God looked sternly at the angels and asked, “And why are you celebrating?”

“Because we got ‘em!” Came back the chorus.

And God wept.

Through tears God said, “Don’t you know that the Egyptians are my children too?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Saying Yes and Saying No: On Rendering to God and Caesar*, Westminster, 1986, 11

<sup>ii</sup> Joe Harvard, from a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC, January 25, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Fred Craddock, *Sermons*, 48.

<sup>iv</sup> Richard Rogers, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” *South Pacific*, 1949

<sup>v</sup> Jonah 1:2

<sup>vi</sup> Craddock, 50.

<sup>vii</sup> Marj Carpenter, “A Little Bit Farther: More Stories of ‘Mission to the Ends of the Earth’.” Geneva Press, 1998, 5.