

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Stephanie Sorge Wing
Mark 1: 14-20; Jonah 3: 1-10
“The Call”
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
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I must say, objectively speaking, I have the best job in the world. I get to work with the most amazing students at such a formational time in their lives. These years are prime for discovering who you are, really experiencing the world around you, and seeing where your life story is going to enrich the human narrative. Anything is possible. What better time is there to discern who God is calling you to be?

For college students especially, questions of discernment and call are ever-present. Students have to decide what to do over school breaks, where to spend their summers, if, when, and where to study abroad, what classes to take, which extra-curriculars to join, and so much more. Then you hit senior year, when everyone wants to know, what *are* your plans following graduation?

How do we discern God’s calling in our lives? The question is an obvious one for students to consider, because one way or another, they’re going to have to move on. It can be uncomfortable, exciting, terrifying, or all of that at the same time, and more. This transitional time of life often extends beyond the first few years out of college, but many of us hopefully, ideally, at some point, arrive at a time and place that is more settled. At least that’s how I’m told it works.

Of course, life following Jesus is rarely... settled. Just when we seem to have found our groove and gotten comfortable, there is another interruption: career change, promotion, job loss, sickness, marriage, divorce, life, death, disability, bankruptcy, inheritance... Above and beyond these life changes, as ones seeking to follow Christ, we never know where that may lead. When we begin to sense God’s calling in our lives, how do we respond?

Our two lessons seem to be a study in the "do's and don'ts of answering God's call."

Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, are literally in their boats, hard at work, when Jesus calls to them to come and follow him. It's an odd call, especially the part about fishing for people, but the crazy part of this story is that they do it! They just get up and leave everything behind. They abandon the tools of their livelihood. For heaven’s sake, James and John leave their poor dad behind in the boat! They heard God's call, and they followed it, no questions asked. And since it is Mark telling this story, they respond “immediately,” of course.

Then we turn to Jonah, the reluctant Israelite prophet. Our reading today picks up right when Jonah starts to finally obey God's call, but it isn't the immediate, drop everything response that we see from the disciples. Remember the beginning of this story? God's command is immediate: "Go at once to that great city Ninevah, and cry out against it." Jonah responds immediately. He gets moving, quickly, in the other direction.

Oh, Jonah. He has the brilliant plan to flee God’s presence. How does *that* work out for him? Well, God sends a mighty storm, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. Finally he cries out to God for deliverance. The fish spews Jonah back onto dry land. He hardly has time to dry off, when God calls a second time, which is the beginning of today's reading. This time he listens and obeys... More or less.

Nineveh was the big city. The text says it would take 3 days to walk across the whole place. But we read that Jonah "begins" to go to Nineveh, and goes just one day's walk. There he makes the short announcement that the city will be destroyed in forty days. This takes exactly four words in Hebrew. Four words, and then he leaves. “Forty days. You’re toast!” Word travels to the King, but not from Jonah's mouth. The message is heard, almost in spite of Jonah. God's call to Jonah is crystal clear, but

Jonah's response is delayed, and grudgingly given. God's call to the Ninevites was barely a whisper in Jonah's mouth, but they responded with total resolve.

The story of Jonah is a fascinating one. If you ever want to hear it told really well, search "Mary Margaret and Jonah" on YouTube. It isn't our own Mary Margaret, but I have a feeling this one might be filling a pulpit somewhere in a few years. It's a story of call, conflict, second chances, and redemption, and one of epic proportions. There are also some very curious turns in the story.

One is Jonah's proclamation to the people. Throughout the Bible, prophets were calling people to repentance. It's such a familiar sermon. It also happens to be Jesus' first proclamation, as we heard in the passage from Mark. Jonah prophesies destruction, but he does not actually call the people to repent. Instead, the king takes the bold initiative to call for true repentance throughout the land. He says, "Who knows, God may change his mind, and save us after all."

That bit about God changing his mind – that's a whole other subject about which many words have been written. But, that is exactly what happens. It seems that the people's response is what influences God's action. From this, one could easily say that our response to God's call is absolutely critical. Which makes the question of how we respond to God today all the more important.

But perhaps the most amazing aspect of the story is the result: an entire city – the capital city of a notoriously brutal empire – repented, and was forgiven by God. Jonah speaks four words somewhere on the edge of town, and as a result, over 120,000 are saved. Do you know of any other sermons that have had the same level of success? It sure provides preachers with encouragement to keep it short and sweet.

Jonah may go out of his way to show us the don'ts of responding to God's call, but his reluctant and way less than half-hearted response to God is all that is needed to accomplish great things. That is a lesson for us to learn – God's call to us really isn't about us at all.

It's easy to get consumed by our search for purpose, our quest to discern the very important things that we are called to do, but in the end, it's about the things that God will do in and through us – and often in spite of ourselves. That's great news! Doesn't it take the pressure off of us to know what a small and insignificant part of the equation we are?

Still, we are part of the equation. The response of the Ninevites changed God's course of judgment. Fishing nets and boats were left at the lake shore. And even Jonah finally made it to Ninevah. We, too, have a response to make.

When talking about call, we can quickly become pretty self-centered. We dream about the important work we are specially gifted and uniquely called to do. But our giftedness isn't about our gifts – it is about the one who has given them. Our particular calls aren't about the very important tasks with which we have been entrusted, they are about the very particular ways that we are invited to participate in God's ongoing work of creation and redemption in the world. It's obvious that we are a far cry from the goodness of God's initial creation. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near, but most days it seems pretty far away.

When I looked back at the reading from Mark, I wondered why the Lectionary Committee chose these particular text limits. It seems to bring together two unrelated stories. In most Bibles you'll find them under two different headings. Verses 16-20 tell of Jesus calling the disciples, but what does that have to do with the two verses that precede it?

John has been arrested, and Jesus begins proclaiming: "repent, and believe in the good news." Actually, I love the way the Common English Bible translates this: "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

Obviously it's unrelated to call, so we can ignore it, right? Maybe not. Both in Greek and Hebrew, the words for repentance indicate turning around, reversing course, or returning to God. We tend to think about repentance as confession, admitting guilt, and showing remorse, but it is much more active. It is an actual reorientation back to God. In order to be in a position to hear and respond to God's call in our lives, we need to turn, to return, or be re-oriented back to the One who created us and redeems us. When it comes right

down to it, calling, vocation, and our purpose in life all boil down to God's ongoing work of creation and redemption in the world.

Speaking of redemption, there are familiar words of assurance from 2 Corinthians: "If anyone is in Christ..." – what? Many translations say "he is a new creation," but the Greek literally says, "Behold – there is a new creation."

There is a direct link between creation and redemption, between repentance – turning towards God - and participating in the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The final of the great ends of the church is "the exhibition of the kingdom of Heaven to the world." When we are in Christ – look! – the kingdom of heaven breaks through into the mess around us. And we're the ones that exhibit that! Being in Christ, following Jesus, and answering God's call in our lives means letting go. Dropping our nets, or smartphones, or laptops, ceasing our fights, breaking down our walls of separation, or any of the other things that keep us at a safe distance from God's disruptive work of redemption. So, what is God's call for us?

To repent, and believe the good news – that the kingdom of God is near. To turn and be re-oriented to our Creator. To "Come and see" where God is at work in the world, and to join in there. To exhibit the kingdom of Heaven to the world in our relationships, our actions, and our aims. To be a new creation. Worry less, trust more. Worry less about where we are heading and what we are supposed to do with our lives, and trust more that in turning to God, we will find the way. The Way will find us. Just hang on – it's going to be quite the ride.