

“A Big Fish And Chunk Of Marble”

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Jonah 3

Today we are going to consider what it means to follow Jesus throughout life. And of course to do this, as you might expect, we'll be talking about a big fish and a chunk of marble.

Jesus continues to call us to follow throughout our lives. It is not a one-time thing.

We'll start with the story of Jonah and a big fish.

This story communicates pretty clearly how God continually called Jonah, over and over again. Jonah first heard God call him to go to Nineveh and tell them a message of their impending destruction due to their evil ways.

How many of you have recently had young children in your house, or have been around young kids between about two and four years old? I remember when Qwynn got to that age she was really good at

saying the same thing that Jonah said in response to God.

I would ask Qwynn to do something and she would stare back at me with her bottom lip protruding and say defiantly “No!”

Jonah said this to God when God wanted him to go to Nineveh. He had a pretty good reason to refuse too. In fact, most Hebrew people would have agreed with him and replied the same way.

You see, as far as the Hebrews were concerned, the Ninevites were not God's chosen people. They thought of themselves as God's only chosen ones and the Ninevites were their enemies. So, the last thing that the Hebrews wanted was for their enemy to hear any message about God's salvation. They would rather have prayed for the destruction of Nineveh and felt justified in doing so.

When God called him, Jonah said “No!” and ran from God. He jumped a ship in the opposite direction and headed out of Dodge in a hurry!

But what does Psalm 139 say? “Where can I go from your Spirit?”

Where can I flee from your presence?”

God had other plans for Jonah and for the people of Nineveh.

As the story goes, the ship was tossed by a raging storm and Jonah shouted out to the crew, “It’s my fault, throw me overboard.” So, they threw him overboard and the waters calmed.

But Jonah wrestled with his own sins as he sank deep into the ocean, swirling in seaweed and into the penetrating darkness — Jonah was lost. ...

Then he remembered God, who had not abandoned him even in the deep recesses of death. He was swallowed by a whale and three days later he was reborn from the belly of this fish onto the shore.

Let’s hear the next part of the story.

Read Jonah 3

This is craziness! God saved the enemy of the Hebrews! God wasn’t supposed to do that.

Even after Jonah said “No” for all of the culturally right reasons, God continued to call Jonah.

God didn’t call Jonah once at the beginning and a second time after being spit up on the shore by the whale.

- God also called Jonah on the boat during the storm.
- God called Jonah as he was sinking into the water after being thrown overboard.
- God called Jonah while he was in the belly of the whale.
- God called Jonah after he was spit up on the shore.
- God called Jonah as he was traveling to Nineveh.
- God called Jonah as he traveled through Nineveh proclaiming God’s word.
- God called to Jonah after the people of Nineveh were saved, when, by the way, he was angry about what God had done.

Did Jonah always like what God wanted him to do? No! In fact, he disagreed with what God was doing every step of the way, and yet God was still with him, calling him.

If we read the last chapter of the book (which, by the way, is your

homework) we find that Jonah was angry with God right to the end because God saved the people of Nineveh. He was upset because God's grace had no bounds and even extended to his enemies.

This meant that Jonah didn't yet see the whole picture and was still learning to understand God's ways.

Are we also still learning?

Jonah was learning that God's grace was expansive and available even to the Ninevites.

Beyond that, Jonah was learning that God's grace was also available even to him when he was rebellious and angry with God.

Have you ever been angry with God?

Even when Jonah was upset with God, God never left him, but continued to pursue him and continued to work at redeeming his life, just as God was relentlessly redeeming these folk the Israelites hated in Nineveh.

God kept calling Jonah through it all and I would imagine in the days and months after the book of Jonah's last verse.

How many times do you think that God has called you?

May we all find the courage and humility to hear God calling us, and then respond by following.

Following Jesus might feel daunting. After all, the life that Jesus lived ultimately led to his own death. If we are to follow it very well might cost us something dear. We may face a similar fate.

Following Jesus is not going to be a comfortable, secure, happy-go-lucky ride. It may be a journey filled with pain and heartache.

At the same time, when we are doing what God created us to do, we will be living a life that is more fulfilling than we could ever imagine.

So, don't be discouraged. God knows you better than you know yourself, and will not lead you astray while you fulfill your purpose in life.

So here we have the age old, unanswerable question: "What is the purpose or meaning of life?"

I don't think there is one easy answer for everyone, but I am convinced that the answer is

discovered on the path of following Jesus. It is a mystery revealed as you follow.

Following Jesus does not require that you change anything about your life before you start that journey. That would be like getting cleaned up before you take a bath.

No, Jesus asks us to follow just as we are — like Jonah with all his doubts, fears and insecurity. He asks that we remain open to be changed by the Holy Spirit's presence along the way. As we remain on the journey, God will mold us into what God created us to be.

This leads us to the chunk of marble I spoke about earlier. It is the story of Michelangelo and how he created the statue *David*, of one of the most renowned statues of all time. *David* was one of 12 large commissioned statues for a spectacular cathedral in Florence, Italy. Two other artists had been commissioned to complete this work and had only roughly hewn part of the lower legs, then the 19-foot tall chunk of marble lay outside in the weather for more than 25 years.

A group of people representing the cathedral created a search

committee to find the right artist to complete this work. They consulted many artists, including Leonardo Da Vinci, but it was 27-year-old Michelangelo who convinced them he was the man for the job.

How did he do this? He shared his vision for what *David* could be and they loved it. Why did they love it?

They loved it because, Michelangelo had in his mind a clear picture of what *David* looked like before he began. Then he got out his chisel and started chipping away everything that wasn't David. Two years later his masterpiece was revealed and has endured for more than 500 years.

Jesus was that way for his disciples. He had a clear understanding of who they really were. He told Peter right away, "You have been a fisherman. Follow me and I will make you a fisher of men." He knew who Peter really was and called him to truly live.

Jesus called to Peter and chipped away his pride, chipped away at his arrogance. He helped Peter fine tune his impulsiveness and redirect it. What emerged was a man who became the leader of the early

church that changed the course of history.

Back to Jonah: God chipped away at his tendency to run away. God chipped away at his lack of faith. God chipped away at his lack of trust. What emerged was a man who proclaimed the good news of God's love and a town of 120,000 people turned toward God, who then showed them grace, mercy and love.

God is also calling you to follow. As you follow, God will chip away what gets in the way for you to fully live the way that God created you to live.

Is God chipping away that crutch or excuse that keeps you from committing to God's work? You know the excuse — the one that you have told yourself is true, although you know it is just a facade or excuse.

God wants to chip away all sorts of things that we have held onto that keep us uncommitted. These things prevent us from expressing our God-given nature, the divine spark within us. They prevent the gift that we are to the world from being shared and expressed.

God wants to chisel away everything in your life that isn't really you — so that the real you might be unhindered.

What would your life look like if you were truly free from those fears, those half-truths, from all of the things that have hindered you? What if you were unencumbered by those things that have you stopped and stuck?

Like a good rabbi, Jesus is calling, and calling, and calling you, bidding you over and over again to follow him and truly live.

Have you felt Jesus calling you repeatedly over this past week, or month, or perhaps several years of time?

How are you answering that call? Are you echoing Jonah's "No!" or are you saying "Yes, Jesus I want to follow you"?