

“Excuse Me, God is Calling...Again!”

Date: Jan. 24, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Themes: Calling, Discipleship

Excuse me, God is calling. Again! Last week, our gospel lesson was about Jesus calling his disciples to “Come and see.” We were introduced to Phillip and Nathaniel. Phillip, on the one hand, represents those people who meet Jesus and right away they decide, “This is the guy to follow. Sign me up. Count me in. I’m your guy; I’m your gal; you can count on me.”

Nathaniel, on the other hand, represents those who hear about Jesus and they aren’t so sure they want to follow. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asks Nathaniel. He’s skeptical. He reminds us, a bit, of another disciple by the name of Thomas, whom we call “The Doubter.” Folks like him think or say, “Show me the proof, then I’ll believe.”

Two very different reactions to Jesus – immediate attraction versus skepticism. This morning we have two more “call stories,” one from the Old Testament and the other from the New. God is always calling to people. God calls to get our attention. God calls to bring us into relationship with himself. God calls to give us an assignment to do. God calls to give us our life’s vocation.

And so, this morning’s sermon title is “Excuse Me, God is Calling, Again!” You see, God is patiently calling us, very insistent and also faithful to us. God does not give up on us, nor does God turn the divine back on us. God is constantly reaching out to us, wooing us, courting us – to use the language of love.

When God calls us into a special relationship with Himself, it is never simply for special privilege; it is always for a purpose. The nation of Israel

was called to be God's chosen people, not because they were more *special* than the other nations, but because God intended them to be a light to the other nations. God desires for the people of the world to live in community, where justice, mercy and love rule. Israel was to be the example.

Now, in the Old Testament lesson this morning we meet a fellow by the name of Jonah. Most of us remember Jonah from our Sunday school days. He's the guy who got swallowed up by a whale. But the take-away from Jonah's story is not how big the fish was, nor whether a person a person could actually live in the belly of a fish for several days.

No, the moral of this small book of the Bible has to do with God's *call* on the life of Jonah. If you go back to the first chapter of Jonah, verse two, we hear God giving Jonah his marching orders: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

God is calling Jonah for a very specific purpose. God needs a prophet to go and preach to the people of Nineveh and warn its people about the ungodly and immoral lives they are leading. Like John the Baptist who came later, Jonah was to call the people to repentance, to change their ways, to live according to God's precepts of love, justice and mercy.

But Jonah didn't want to do it. In many ways, Jonah represents you and me. How often we resist what we know God is calling us to do. It's not that we don't know what God's will is. We just don't want to do it. It's not that we haven't heard God's call. We would rather run in the opposite direction – which is exactly what Jonah did.

He got on another ship headed for a different city – Tarshish. Now, sometime during his escape from God, there is a terrible storm and Jonah gets tossed overboard. While he's in the sea, allegedly in the belly of a

whale, Jonah comes to his senses and decides he ought to do the right thing and obey the Lord. God never abandoned Jonah, and continually talked to him, even when he was in the belly of the whale.

Finally, Jonah gets an eviction notice from the whale and swims onto dry land. The Lord comes to him again and says, “Jonah, *now* will you go to Nineveh and preach to the people there? I love them, and I want them to repent. You’re my man. Please, go there and proclaim the message I will give you.” Jonah does what the Lord asks, and guess what. The people of Nineveh repent and God forgives them.

Now, people of God, we don’t always like it when the word of the Lord comes to us, asking us to be a kind of people for Him. We don’t always like it when God speaks to us, and we know it’s the Lord, asking us to do something that makes us feel uncomfortable. Sometimes we fight within ourselves; sometimes we even try to run away.

But the hound of heaven will chase after us. Are you familiar with the poem by that name, written by Francis Bacon? It’s a powerful poem and one of my favorites. The first stanza reads like this:

I fled him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat, and a Voice beat
More instant than the feet – “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

The point is, you can run from God, but you can't hide. Jonah found that out. God is constantly speaking to us, pursuing us, seeking us out, calling us into relationship, and calling us to follow Jesus.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, we find Jesus once again calling his first disciples. The first four he called were fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John. He meets them and he calls them, while at their work place. God, through Jesus, meets us on our own turf, and it's not always in a church building.

Now, if Jonah represents the person who runs away when God calls them to a mission, then Peter, Andrew, James and John represent the ideal response. They drop everything to follow Jesus. When Jesus calls them, there is a sense of urgency. "The time is now," he tells them. "You have a choice: keep doing what you're doing now, or follow me."

Peter and his brother Andrew drop their nets and they walk away with Jesus. Jesus called, and they followed. There was something compelling about this man: the way he spoke, the way he carried himself. He was different from other men. They could see something of God in this man, and they wanted *more* of what he had to offer.

Jesus called people to follow him two thousand years ago. And he's still calling people today – to leave their nets, their old way of life, and to follow him. Jesus invites us to listen to his words and to allow those words to wash over us and make us new.

Jesus is speaking to you, this day. He's calling you, you who hear my voice, to follow Him, to be his disciple, to put your trust in Him and in His way of life. And so, I ask you, will you be like Jonah and run away? Or will you respond like Peter, Andrew, James and John, who dropped their nets and decided to follow Jesus?

I pray that you will make a decision to follow Jesus. If you haven't already done so, I invite you to make a commitment to Christ this morning. And if you've already decided to follow Jesus, I invite you to renew that commitment.

May we use this time now, to give our hearts to Christ, or to renew our commitment to loving and serving Him. Let us pray.

“O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your persistent love that follows us, day by day. No matter how far we run from you, no matter how much we rebel against you, you still pursue us. Not because you want to punish us and destroy us, but because you love us and want to redeem us.

Forgive us, Lord, the tendency to be like Jonah and to run away from your love. Forgive our trespasses when in our rebellious state we didn't know what we were doing. Wipe the slate clean. Forgive us our shortcomings, our faults and our failures. Put a new and right spirit within us.

Thank you, God, for giving us Jesus, your beloved Son, to show us what your love looks like. Today, if we have not already done so, we offer our hearts to Him. We want his spirit within us. May we die to the old way of living and allow Christ to live within us, that we may follow your will more closely.

And for those who have been following the way of Jesus for some time, we renew our commitment to Him. Grant us the courage and the holy boldness to live in His name, to listen for his voice, and to do what we know is pleasing to you, Heavenly Father. Grant us your Holy Spirit, that we may discern your will from our own. Receive our lives, God, for we offer them back to you, in Jesus' name. Amen.”