“***Drop What You’re Doing”*** by S. Finlan. The First Church, Jan. 24, 2021

**Jonah 3:1–5, 10**

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.” 3So 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. 4Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. . .

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.

**Mark 1:14–20**

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 lake—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. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

If you’re like me, your day can fill up with necessary chores, and it can be hard to set aside time to be watchful for spiritual messages. But what do you *do* when you receive an important message? Both Bible stories today show how spiritual messages can radically change our lives.

The common thread between the biblical stories is that both seem to say “drop what you’re doing. There’s something more important for you to do.” The Ninevites of the Old Testament need to drop what they’re doing and listen to Jonah’s prophecy, which they do! It’s astonishing that some proud Gentiles should stop and listen to a Hebrew prophet, and then promptly repent in sackcloth and ashes, which symbolizes either mourning or repentance.

Jonah is a remarkable little story. It is actually a clever and poignant protest against nationalistic arrogance, showing the Gentiles to be more responsive to God’s word than Jonah himself is. Jonah had initially refused to cooperate with God’s message, and had fled on a ship “to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:3). Despite its fantastic elements, Jonah has a serious message, about the possibilities for sincerity that Gentiles have. We also have great possibilities. Each future chapter of our life is yet unwritten, and we are the authors of our own story.

Now let’s look at the “drop what you’re doing” aspect of the story in Mark’s gospel. He makes it sound like these men were called out of the blue, and dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus. Now, we know from the Gospel of John that Peter and Andrew were already principal disciples of John the Baptist (1:35–40) and from the Gospel of Luke that James and John were partners of Simon and Andrew (5:10), so these men were already involved in important religious work in Galilee, and were probably already known to Jesus before becoming his disciples.

But Mark wants to emphasize the tone of immediacy, which had to do with Jesus’ own perception. At one point he said “my hour has not yet come” (John 2:4), but by this time, when he called the apostles, his hour *had* come, and he was forming his organization. It would mean a new chapter in *their* lives for each of the apostles. Jesus knew they had untapped reserves of strength and that each would bring his own essential and unique qualities to his mission. Something inside each of them responded to the call of Jesus. When *we* hear the Word, something inside of *us* responds to it, harmonizes with *our* spiritual strength. We need to give ourselves the gift of time, set aside from the daily chores to enable us to listen and reflect upon the message.

Both texts have to do with proclaiming God’s message. The fishermen whom Jesus chooses to be his apostles will be charged with preaching his message while he’s alive, but even more so after he has departed. They have seen as well as heard the living Word, and are sent out to the world to be message bearers. And people responded.

“The people of Nineveh believed God” (Jonah 3:5). “Simon and his brother Andrew . . . left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:16, 18). These people listened. The Ninevites needed to listen to an Israelite. The apostles needed to listen to Greeks, Syrians, and Romans. *We* must listen to each other in our families, our communities, and throughout our country and the world. We must become receptive, active listeners. The greatest pastoral skill is to be a good listener. To be good Americans right now, we all need some pastoral skill, the ability to care about our fellows. We don’t have to agree with them, but we should become better listeners.

God is open to the Gentiles and to all people, and the messengers of God have to drop what they’re doing and proclaim the invitation. Jonah reluctantly became a prophet to the Ninevites. Peter became a fisher for people. We need to be open to all people, since we do not know who will respond to a spiritual message. We have to be ready to be surprised and even changed. It is not right for us to look down upon Ninevites or Samaritans. It is not right for us to pre-judge liberals or conservatives.

As the Gospel of John tells us, Jesus came “to unite the scattered children of God” (John 11:52 HCSB). He draws up our loyalties, our instincts, and directs them toward God, causing our other concerns to become secondary: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you” (Matt 6:33). If we keep spiritual principles primary, we won’t become overwhelmed with secondary issues. In that passage, the secondary things were cares about food and clothing, but it could also include cares about political opinion and style. Don’t strive for those things, but for the fundamental truths: “you are all brothers. . . You have one Father, who is in heaven” (Matt 23:8–9 HCSB), as we hear him saying in Matthew 23. These are the basics; these, and the fact that we are supposed to *experience* spiritual growth. The Father expects to see spiritual fruits.

Spiritual unity does not mean that we will all think alike, but that we will all *strive* alike, that we will all honestly seek the Father’s will. Spiritual unity arises from our ability to recognize spiritual motivation in others, even in those with whom we don’t agree intellectually. It involves letting consideration and respect be more important than being right or winning arguments. “Follow me,” Jesus said. We can follow him and make friends with Syrians and Samaritans, people who are not just like us.

We have the ability and the strength within to work with each other, to unite in common cause. We can put God’s word into action to heal, to unite, to build together. And together we will discover new possibilities. What will your contribution be?