

JONAH 3:1-5, 10 (p. 753)

JANUARY 24, 2021

MARK 1:14-20 (p. 812)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, we are here today because you have Called us. You have graciously invited each one of us to be a part of your glorious plan, and summoned us, lovingly, to be your people. We are here, not so much because we have searched for you, but rather because you have searched for us. So please Lord, help us to have as much faith in ourselves as you have in us. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

"CALLED BY GOD"

Last week we talked about the Call of Samuel, and that of Nathanael, and a bit about our own Call to follow the Lord. We discovered how important it is to listen for that Call, and to listen "to" that Call when it comes. Maybe you remember? Well today, we are going to talk about the Call of Simon Peter, and that of Andrew—the Call of James and John, the sons of Zebedee—and the Call of an Old Testament Hero named Jonah. And in the process, hopefully see what it might mean to ignore God's Call.

And I'm going to start with an assumption. I'm going to assume that most of you are familiar with the story of Jonah. You may even know it quite well. It's been around for a while, so that's entirely possible. You may have first heard it in Sunday School, years ago, or sitting on a grandparent's knee. You may have read it recently, maybe in preparation for Worship today. That's always a good idea! It's a rather short book really, direct and to the point. Only four chapters long, just two pages from start to finish.

You might even be aware that the 1940's Disney Blockbuster, "Pinocchio" is based, in part, on this text. As is an 1883 Italian Children's Novel, "The Adventures of Pinocchio"! We know the story, right! And quite possibly a lot about the story! But I wonder if we know what it means?

A Prophet of the Lord—a man by the name of Jonah, the son of Amittai—from the village of Gath Hepher—way back in the middle of the Eighth Century BC—receives a Call from God. Jonah was a Spiritual Advisor to the King of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, King Jeroboam. We first hear about him in 2 Kings 14:25, when Jonah counsels the King on expanding the boundaries of Israel. And here, in a book named after him, we witness Jonah becoming the first Hebrew Prophet sent on a Missionary Journey to a Heathen Nation! To what God describes as "a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from the their left"!

Jonah is sent to Nineveh, a city that is now part of the modern-day city of Mosul, in Iraq. Maybe you've heard of it? Jonah's Call is to go to "non-believers", "uninformed non-believers"! We might immediately see it as "Evangelistic" in nature! Only Jonah is not told to proclaim Good News, or even repentance! But rather, to announce their doom and destruction! Can you imagine?

Jonah was extremely nationalistic, a real Patriot! He loved his Country very much! He is the kind of guy who would wear a "Northern Kingdom of Israel" Flag Pin, on the lapel of his robe! You know, like the Politicians in Washington do today!

Which may explain why, when he receives his Mission Assignment, Jonah immediately balks at the thought! “Nineveh! Are you kidding me Lord! Go to Nineveh, the Capital City of our arch enemy, the dreaded Assyrians! Are you nuts? They’re a terrible people, Lord! Cruel! Brutal even! Why would I want to go there?”

“Their kings actually flaunt their evil exploits! They are proud of the misery that they cause! So much so that they go to great lengths and expense to record them for posterity! They carve large stone panels with their grisly battle scenes, and place them on their Palace walls! They engrave pictures of torture and abuse on obelisks and pillars, just so archeologists will dig them up thousands of years from now! Those Ninevites are really rotten Lord! They do all kinds of unspeakable things!”

And according to Historians, Jonah is right! I won’t go into the horrific details, but suffice it to say that they describe the Assyrian rein on the world stage as the most, “Gory and Blood Curdling history has ever known”! Tens of thousands of people, in hundreds of cities across the Middle East, suffered an appalling “two hundred and fifty-year reign of terror at the hands of the Assyrians”! Why would Jonah want to go there? Why would anyone want to go there?

From Jonah’s perspective, Nineveh is a huge nest of vipers—filled with a hundred and twenty thousand vile serpents! Why in the world would he want them to repent, to turn to the Lord and be forgiven? Would you, if you were in Jonah’s sandals? Wouldn’t you rather see justice for this bunch of ruthless murders, and rapists, and child abusers?

So instead, Jonah does what many of us would do. He says “No” to God, and runs the other way! God tells him to go East, so Jonah goes West. God sends him to one of the largest cities in the ancient world, so Jonah immediately takes off for the wilderness! God says, “Jonah, I have a job for you”! But instead of doing it, our reluctant Prophet grabs the first boat out of Dodge! I’m sure you remember that part of the story!

And his flight, “Away from the Call of God”, leads Jonah to board a ship headed for Tarshish, way over in modern-day Spain, or Northern Lebanon perhaps, near the Rock of Gibraltar for you Geography nuts, 3,000 miles in the opposite direction! Which eventually, through Divine intervention, sends this Prophet of God into the stomach of a great big fish! That’s the part that most of us remember. And while he is in there, in the bowels of that fish, our, “I Don’t Want to Be a Prophet” Prophet, bursts into a combination of song and prayer! Which causes the fish to vomit him up on shore, the exact same thing that people around me do, when I start to sing!

Jonah ran away from the Call of God! The Lord sent him on a specific mission—to do a specific task, in a specific place, at a specific time—but Jonah, instead, completely ignores what God wants him to do! Maybe he is narcissistic, thinking only of himself? Or maybe he is simply being loyal, thinking about his Country? Maybe he is worried about his personal safety, or wondering if he is qualified for the job? Maybe he is fearful, you know, concerned how he might look to those around him? His calendar is jammed-packed right now? His Dance Card is full? Jonah, like most of us, is pretty good at excuses!

Or maybe his motivation is something else entirely! The bottom line is, Jonah chooses to run away from the Call of God! And the Lord, in response to that rebellion, sends a terrible storm into his life! I wonder if we can relate?

I also wonder if modern-day Psychologists would say that Jonah was Clinically Depressed? After all, when the storms were raging around him on the ship, Jonah goes down below deck, and takes a nap. That's a classic indicator of depression, you know, not being able to keep your eyes open. As the tempests swirl, and the sailors toss cargo over the side to lighten the load, Jonah simply lays down and goes to sleep.

And then, as the sea continues to get rougher and rougher—and the sailors beg him to tell them what they should do—Jonah, apparently apathetic now, maybe suicidal says, “Just pick me up and throw me over the side”! He is carrying a lot! I get that! And it's affecting him mentally and emotionally! Only that doesn't justify ignoring God's Call!

Have you ever noticed that the Sailors on the ship were “Non-Believers”? They are not Hebrews, not God-fearing Jews. They are Heathens, just like the Ninevites! Each of them, we're told, “cried out to his-own god”! And yet they turned to The Lord, the One True God! And when they did, when they pray to Jonah's God, Yahweh calms the wind and the waves immediately! God saves them, saves these “Unenlightened Gentiles”!

Jonah is already being an Evangelistic Missionary, isn't he? He is already converting people, even in the midst of running away, and not even knowing he's doing it! Did you remember that part?

Oh, I know you remember the special effects—the part about a great big fish and all! You may see that the storm, and all the drama, is actually designed to get Jonah’s attention! You may even realize that God Himself protected our Reluctant Prophet, and provided for him, in truly amazing ways, even when he was in the belly of that fish! That part is memorable! I just don’t think that’s the only lesson here! Which brings us to today’s portion of the text, when the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time.

Now don’t get me wrong, Act II in the drama is every bit as intense as the part that took place out on the sea, before Intermission! It just doesn’t have a whale in it, so most of us tend to forget this part! But the Lord Called out to Jonah again, a second time. And this time, our unwilling, reluctant hero, chooses to obey! Obviously, the storms, and the fish, and the angry sailors—not to mention God’s intervention and Providence—have gotten his attention!

Jonah now turns in the direction that he is Called to go. He waltzes right into one of the largest metropolitan cities of his time—one that is so big that it takes three days to walk through—a city that, according to archeologists, had seven and half miles of wall surrounding it, as well as countless acres of farms and pasture land outside of that wall! And Jonah walks in boldly, proclaiming the total destruction of the entire city!

I can’t imagine he was very popular, can you? I mean picture it! Jonah doesn’t say “God sent me”. He doesn’t even call the Ninevites to repent, in order to avoid God’s wrath! He just says, “It’s all over folks! Death and destruction are at hand!”

“Annihilation is coming, and in just forty days! You’ve got less than six weeks to prepare people, to get your affairs in order, to kiss your babies, goodbye! It’s over! Done!” No! I don’t think he was very popular! You can see why he didn’t want to go, can’t you? But he did, didn’t he? He did go. And the result, incredibly, is that all of the Ninevites, from the greatest to the least, turned to God! They all repented! All of these “barbarians,” these brutal savages, opened their hearts to the Lord and believed! In fact, they declared a city-wide fast! They put on sackcloth and sat down in ash piles! They humble themselves, each and every one of them! Even the King himself, the supreme ruler of this murderous Empire, steps down from his throne, removes his royal robes, and turns to God!

And notice that Jonah, our reluctant hero, on seeing all this, gets downright mad! “See God, I told you! I knew this was going to happen! These wicked creeps, these brutal lowlifes, all on their own, have decided to repent! And you, Lord, in your infinite love, have decided not to destroy them! I knew you would do that! I knew that in your graciousness and compassion you would relent! I saw this coming, Lord, from the very start! That’s why I didn’t want to come here in the first place! That’s why I ran away! You are too kind Lord, too forgiving! These people don’t deserve that! In fact, just kill me now! Take away my life! Because I simply cannot stand to see your Grace poured out on these sinners!” So, be honest. Did you remember that part?

It says something, doesn’t it? It says, at the very least, that we, like Jonah, need to stop and consider who is, and who isn’t loved by God, right? There wasn’t anyone worse in the eyes of God’s Chosen People than the Assyrians!

There is no further “opposite” for their concept of good! And yet The Lord called these “Unacceptables” to repent and follow Him! And they did, all on their own! It wasn’t even Jonah who did the calling! It was God Himself! The Lord showered Grace on these “Sinners”, for no apparent reason at all! God personally Called these totally lost folks to be His own! Can you believe it? How do you think Jonah must have felt?

I’ll bet it was similar to the way the Pharisees and Sadducees felt, seven hundred and fifty years later, when The Lord called untrained, uneducated, unconnected Fisherman to share the Good News. People who “immediately” dropped their nets and followed Him!

Just fourteen verses into the Gospel of Mark, right after Jesus has been identified as the Son of God, just after the Holy Spirit descends on Him, right in front of everyone, that’s what we see! None of them was “worthy”, not by worldly standards, let alone by religious ones! Not one of them was qualified in any way! None of them were theologically trained, or schooled in dissertation or rhetoric, or practiced in any of the literary arts! None of them was oratorically enlightened, prepared in any way!

And yet, God called them to follow Him! And “at once”, it says, “immediately”, without delay, they drop everything, leaving their boats and their families, their hired hands, their entire way of life, to step out in faith to answer that Call!

There seems to be a pattern here, doesn't there? A biblical pattern! All through Scripture, Sinners and Tax Collectors, Women of questionable reputation, regular, everyday people, Fisherman and such, are Called by God! Ninevites, reluctant Prophets, godless sailors— Roman Centurions, Gentiles even, those who are less than worthy—are Called by God, drawn to Jesus, tugged by the message of the Gospel! So much so that they are willing to leave all of the “knowns” in their life, and stumble along after Him! So, here's the thing. We qualify, don't we! You and I meet all the criteria necessary to follow Jesus!

That's what the word “Disciple” means, “One Who Follows”! The Lord Calls “the least of these” to witness to His Majesty, to fill critical roles, to step up and do what He does! He doesn't hand-pick the “best of the best” for His ministry team! Or ask us to do tremendous things! He calls regular folks like you and me to faithfully follow, to go where He leads, to do what He did, to do what He says, and make Him known in the world!

That may not seem like the best Business Model! If you were setting all of this up, wouldn't you position eloquent articulators to Preach and Teach the Gospel? If you were Messiah, wouldn't you choose the greatest organizational minds, and the most qualified administrative gurus for all of the duties in the Church? Wouldn't you recruit the “cream of the crop”, and then equip them, arm them with all the latest cutting-edge technology, and train them, and retrain them extensively, at the very best learning centers available? Would you trust something as important as the message of the Kingdom of God to a bunch of rank amateurs? You know, like us!

And if you were a Galilean Fisherman, or a Mother, or a Teacher, or a Farmer, or Student, or a Salesman, or a Lumberjack, would you just drop everything at the Call of God, change your entire way of life, and follow some rather bizarre, itinerate preacher, without at least some kind of absolute proof?

I have to tell you, I keep expecting these “Would-Be-Disciples” to ask, who are you? Where are you going? What’s the plan? But they don’t. I expect them to request training, or leadership materials, or at least a “how to” video. But they don’t. At a minimum, I expect them to ask how long this will take? But they don’t. They just drop what they are doing immediately, without delay, and follow Jesus!

I expect them to complain too, protest a bit, just like everyone else when they are Called. Or at a minimum, offer excuses. “I’d like to but I’ve got work to do. I’ve got a busy couple of months coming up you know. Have you seen my calendar?” I actually anticipate them telling the Lord that they are just not the “right person” for the job, that they are not “gifted” in that way! But they don’t! They just step up, and get in line behind Jesus! And the Kingdom of God begins to roll!

So, where are you in the story? What is your role in this great big plan of God? Are you a Runaway Prophet, who for whatever reason, doesn’t want to hear what God has to say? Or a Reluctant Prophet who eventually, although begrudgingly, obeys God’s Call? Are you the one running away, or the one standing on the deck as the rain drops pelt your face? Or the one hiding down in the bottom of the boat?

Are you currently singing and praying somewhere in the bowels of a whale, or feel as if you have recently been vomited up on shore? Are you a Ninevite, maybe, one who has realized their sin, and heard God's Call? Are you ready to repent, even now, to humble yourself? Or are you a Faithful Believer—one who questions maybe, or even gets down right mad, when the love of God is extended to someone else, especially someone that you don't feel is worthy? Where are you in the story?

And here is a biggie, from a completely different perspective, from a Heavenly point of view! Who are the Ninevites from where you currently stand? Who do you see as unacceptable of God's love? Who is unsalvageable, lost, beyond God's reach, beyond God's Call? Think of all the division in our Country right now, throughout our world really! Who is it that you feel is beyond redemption, beyond you reaching out to in love? Are you sure that you're not missing something? Maybe an opportunity to heal?

Where are you in the story of God? That's really the question, isn't it? And your response, your response to God's Call on your life, may be the single most important choice you ever make! For those who hear your message, as well as for yourself! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Receive these silent prayers Lord. Unburden our hearts and still our minds, as we place into your care our most heartfelt pleas. And fill us, please, with your Holy Spirit, as we kneel now before your Altar of Grace.

Thank you, Lord, for being our God. Thank you for taking our hands and leading us along your paths of righteousness. And thank you for stopping to help us up when we stumble along the way. You are our Comforter and our Guide, our Redeemer and our Sustainer, our Lord and King! You are the Creator of life, not only this one, but the one to come as well. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Cause and the Purpose!

So together, Lord, we have come before you this morning in prayer. You have called us together, and promised that where two or more are gathered in your Name, there you are also. So together, as a family, as one people, Lord, we humbly bow before you now. And it is together, Lord, that we lift up before you these dear loved ones who need you in their lives right now. Please be withPlease grant health and healing where this is the need. Please grant wisdom and guidance for those seeking those gifts. And grant peace and joy for those who are troubled, as well as to those who already bask in your Grace. Pour out compassion, Lord, on us and our world—on our New President and Vice President, on our past President and Vice President—on all of their families, on all of our Leaders, and on this Great Nation of ours! For it is in the Name of your Son, and through the power of your Holy Spirit, and as your Church, that we lift up these prayers today, along with the one that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...