

Matthew 4:18-23 18As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. 19And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 23Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

What Are We Waiting For?

Matthew 4:18-23

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Matt Matthews

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Remember the story of Jonah? He was told to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent. God wants to include Ninevah in God's divine plan, but they've got to turn from sin and follow God's law, God's way, God's love. Instead of going to Ninevah, Jonah goes in the opposite direction, to Tarshish.

You know the rest. God sent a storm to upset the boat Jonah is on. Jonah admits to the crew that the wrath of God is not aimed at them, but at him. They appreciate his confession and throw him overboard where he is consumed by a whale.

Three days later he's spat out onto the beach and, reluctantly (not immediately) Jonah does what God says. Jonah goes to Ninevah and preaches good news. As you read this part of Jonah's story you can feel him dragging his feet. He's not eager to do God's will. And when he does it, he does it slowly, reluctantly, and less than whole-heartedly.

Compare Jonah's reluctance with the disciples' eager, immediate willingness.

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew. "Follow me," he says, "and immediately they left their nets and followed him." Jesus then called James and John. They followed, too. They dropped their nets and they followed. Immediately.

I wish I could follow like that.

When I discern God's voice, I wish I could follow immediately like those beloved disciples. But I'm like that guy Jesus called who said, "I'll be right there, Jesus. But first let me go bury my father." Remember what Jesus said? "Let the dead bury the dead."

Now is the invitation.

Now is your opportunity.

Now you are needed.

Now, not later.

Today, not tomorrow.

This moment, not the next.

So very often God needs to send a whale to swallow me up and spit me back out in the right direction. God invites my immediate response, and I decide, instead, to wait.

In the civil rights movement in this country (both past and present), there were many who said let's move slowly. Let's wait. Let's move forward, but not now. There were many—both black and white—who, like Jonah, high-tailed it to Tarshish, not to the Ninevah to which God had called them.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, many religious leaders said King's work there was "unwise and untimely." This is what King said about waiting for racial equality:

For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." . . . We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

King suggested it was easier for people in places of comfort, of power, and of authority to say "wait." Many people, both white and black, wanted change. But it was easy for white people to go slow, to wait.

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; . . . when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness" -- *then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.*

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We've made progress in Civil Rights in this country, but it's been slow. And thank God Dr. King stomped on the gas pedal.

On my first or second summer here, I took our youth on a Go and Serve Mission Trip to Little Rock where we worked in various social mission agencies. We also toured Central High School, which was the first federally mandated integrated school in the state. Nine African American young people registered for classes and Federal Troops sent in by Eisenhower escorted them to school in September of 1957. They had been waiting a long, long time.

Our kids—I believe all of their families were from the Congo—asked me, "Why did the governor and most of Arkansas try to denied these nine students an education at Central High?" And I said it was because of the color of their skin. Our kids thought I was joking. They thought I was joking. But Lizz and Sabrina let them know this was no joke. Still, it was hard for them to believe that in this land of opportunity people of color would ever be discriminated against. *Just because of the color of their skin.* Our kids were incredulous. They were stunned. This just did not make sense to them.

I felt like a fool trying to explain this to our children. This is not the kind of world God intended us to live in. And yet—

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Jonah dragged his feet. He was reluctant to follow God. And when he decided to follow God, he did so slowly.

Thank God for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus invited them to follow. And they said yes. And they followed. And they did it with confidence, and they did it right away.

Perhaps for a long time, God has been calling you and me to do something, to say something, to try something, to be something, and for a long time we've said "Wait, maybe later." Like Jonah, we've booked passage on a boat going in the opposite direction of where God has invited us to go. Maybe we should skip the whale part, and turn around.

Maybe we could . . .

- accept that invitation
- make that call
- send that note
- pay that visit
- step out
- be still
- give that donation
- renew that friendship
- double that donation
- incubate that prayer
- bring that pie
- explore the sexism or racism that just might exist in us
- rake the neighbor's yard
- tutor in the neighborhood school
- get to know that mission co-worker across the world
- have a conversation with that neighbor we only wave at
- sign up for the next Cuba trip^[1]

What work of our hands is God calling us to share? What of our heart is God calling us to give? What can our generosity of spirit do to bring peace on earth? Is God calling us off the sideline onto the playing field? Is God inviting our congregation to "Lift every voice and sing/Till earth and heaven ring/Ring with the harmonies of Liberty?" Is that the song God has long been wanting us to sing?

What are we waiting for?

^[1] Thank you, Linda Peterson, for your devotional given at our Nurture/Outreach Committee.