

# God's Call and Our Response

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20  
A sermon from the first pew of  
First Presbyterian Church Champaign, Illinois  
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Every generation probably has the tendency to believe the challenges their generation faces are the most dangerous, the most historic. When I read history, I'm not led to that conclusion. But I do believe the division our nation faces are significant.

As I sit down on Wednesday to preach this sermon, the new president of our United States is being sworn in. I've heard people say that President Biden and Vice President Harris have a lot of work to do to unify this nation.

Respectfully, I am reminding everybody I meet that that is not his work alone. It is ours. It is everybody's work. It's my duty as a disciple of Jesus Christ to teach and live the loving-kindness and justice that marinates every page of holy scripture. It's my duty as a disciple to love my neighbor. And, secondarily, that's my duty as a citizen.

That's what I'm thinking about as I preach this sermon. Unite with me now... in prayer.

Holy God, You have called us to be your servants in this world. Grant us wisdom, guide our steps in your ways of justice, hold us accountable and help us hold each other accountable, forgive and redeem our waywardness, fill us with your joy, and bless us to be a blessing to others—to all others. AMEN.

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What strikes me about both of these texts today is the contrast between how immediately the disciples responded to God's call and how it took Jonah a long time and a giant fish to say yes.

Remember the story of Jonah? He was told to go to Ninevah and tell them to repent. God wants to include Ninevah in God's plan, but they've got to turn from sin and, to delight in the things of God, and to follow God's law, God's way, God's will. 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 admits to the crew that the wrath of God isn't aimed at them, but at him. They appreciate his confession and throw him overboard where he is consumed by a giant fish. Three days later Jonah is spat out onto the beach and, reluctantly (not immediately) Jonah does what God says. As you read this part of Jonah's story you can feel him dragging his feet.

In stark contrast is this call story in Mark's gospel. Jesus calls the fishermen. "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 admire these disciples we find in Mark's gospel. When I discern God's voice, I wish I could follow like that—as immediately. Sometimes I follow like that, but often I'm like Jonah. Slow. Reluctant. Full of excuses. *You're not talking to me, are you God?*

So very often God needs to send a giant fish 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, there were many who said let's move slowly. Let's wait. Let's move forward, but inch by inch, not by great strides. There were many—both black and white people, though mainly white people—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."

*"For years now I have heard the word 'wait,'" King wrote. "[The word 'wait'] rings in the ear of every negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant 'never.' . . . ]Justice too long delayed is justice denied."*

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Perhaps for a long time, God has been calling you to do something, to say something, and for a long time you've said "Wait." Like Jonah, you've taken passage on a boat going in the opposite direction of where God has invited you to go. Jonah's story reminds us that God's call follows us—all the way to Tarshish if necessary.

We might say that Jonah is God's reluctant servant, and that Peter, Andrew, James and John are God's eager servants. They teach us to have the courage to trust God's call, and, soon or late, to follow it.

And, finally, one observation and one story.

This is the observation: It's easy to see why we might be reluctant to follow God's call. Following God's call always means change. And sometimes following God's call spells danger.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John said yes to Jesus' call, almost in the same breath that Mark tells us that John the Baptist had been arrested. And what these disciples could not know then, John's head would soon be served on a platter. Had they known that, would they have followed so eagerly?

Peter would be asked later in the gospel if he knew Jesus, and Peter would deny Jesus three times. All those eager, faithful disciples had scattered in Jesus' great hour of need.

We understand. We understand. Who wants to sign up for any chance of danger? Harm? Heartache? I think Jonah might have understood this better than his New Testament cousins.

John's arrest is the context in which these eager disciples said "yes."

That's the observation: Following God's call means change, work, sometimes sacrifice, and sometimes danger.

This is the story: Sixty-year-old Margaret Grun Kibben was in the third day of her new job when the Capitol was overrun by rioters. As lawmakers were being whisked away, she was given a gas mask and a microphone and asked to pray. Kibben is the Presbyterian Navy Rear Admiral who serves as chaplain of the House of Representatives.

In her wildest dreams, this woman who had served in combat, would never have anticipated seeing combat again in what before January 6<sup>th</sup> might have been considered a cushy job.

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Margaret Grun Kibben, and Martin Luther King, Jr, and Andrew King (who preached here last week), and *you* are modern-day disciples who said yes to God's call to be peacemakers. I'm grateful for and inspired by all of you. I'm grateful for all the Peter, Andrew, James, and Johns for their eager yeses. I am inspired by Jonah's reluctant, eventual yes.

Mostly, I'm grateful for God's call to each of us to love and serve our neighbor, to be the church of Jesus Christ in this world so aching to experience Good News.

Whether we say it soon or late, may we, with God's help, say yes.

To God the Creator,  
God the Redeemer,  
and God the Sustainer  
be all glory and honor forever.

AMEN.

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[i] We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights. ~~The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.~~ 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 your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.;" 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.*