

Call and Resistance
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
January 22, 2012
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Texts: Jonah 3.1-5, 10;
Psalm 62.5-12;
I Corinthians 7.29-31;
Mark 1.4-11

Introduction to Jonah:

Our OT lesson for today comes from the book of Jonah which is found within the section of the OT called the Minor Prophets. It is difficult to know how to read the book of Jonah. Should we read it as an historical account or hear it as a tall tale and fable? Some have even suggested we read it as a farce¹. There are comedic moments and much about the story that is ridiculous. When Jonah is called to preach to the Ninevites, he refuses and runs in the opposite direction as if he could actually hide from God. Then a storm comes and he names that storm as the wrath of God coming after him. He throws himself overboard and is swallowed by a fish. He offers a rather self-serving prayer and is vomited on the beach. That is where our text picks up for today.

When it comes to making decisions, really important decisions, many of us (maybe not all but many of us) take our time. We carefully weigh our options and think about the chain reaction one choice might set off over against another. We do our due diligence, we deliberate, and we cautiously make our choice. Especially if the decision to be made includes trusting someone we do not already know, we are especially cautious. We live in an age when even church communities are coached to do background checks not just on paid staff but on volunteers as well. Hope Church hasn't gone quite that far but that is the advice on the street.

¹ Richard Boyce, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 267.

Then we come across this story of Jesus calling the first disciples. Simon and Andrew didn't take one moment for reflection. They didn't even consult each other, let alone do anything remotely like due diligence. When Jesus called, they immediately dropped everything and followed. Somehow they could sense that this one standing before them would change everything and they did not think twice about joining his mission.

Radical shifts in direction don't usually come that easily. But we have two such stories today of people making an instantaneous response when confronted with the invitation to change direction. Although in the case of the Ninevites the motivation was a bit different. Their change of heart came at the threat of imminent destruction.

It's amazing how quickly priorities shift when faced with a crisis. News of a child's sudden illness or the death of a loved one and work that seemed impossible to put off is easily postponed. And the crisis doesn't have to be negative. It could be your dream job or the love of your life walking through the door. Until the crisis is handled or the decision is made, every day affairs get set aside. Even when life can get back to normal, we often make a commitment to live with a new set of priorities.

In a sense the gospel suggests that an encounter with God is that kind of crisis. It forces that kind of decision. After all, when you realize that you are face to face with the Savior and Creator and realize that God's will is not some lofty disconnected idea but is rather a concrete all-encompassing way of life that can bring joy and peace to your heart and give you a sense of purpose – a way to contribute – suddenly all your ideas about what is important or what is real gets turned on its head. When you find yourself in one of those decision-making moments even time takes on a new perspective. Life seems more urgent while problems can seem less overwhelming.

In Paul's mind the life of discipleship (following after God in the way of Christ) relativizes everything. It is not that life ceases to happen or that it doesn't matter anymore. It is just that circumstances of the moment no longer have ultimate importance. I'm aware that this conversation Paul is

having in 1 Corinthians today is part of a larger strand of thought based on some question the church asked of him that we don't precisely know. What he is addressing in here in chapter 7 is how Christians should think about their primary relationships. Should they marry or remain single? If they are already married should they remain married? Part of Paul's answer has to do with his expectation that the end of time is imminent. He offers that what he is advising here is his own opinion. I suppose for all of those reasons we could just move right on by this passage and not spend a whole lot of time with it. But it is interesting when you read the passage in light of Psalm 62. That passage is also addressing the question of where you place your ultimate trust, which is what I think Paul is driving at.

When Andrew and I were talking about getting married it was important to us that we get married because we *want* to be together and not because we *need* to. He did not "complete me" and I was not his "other half." While all those sentiments are arguably romantic we wanted to be careful about that kind of language because we wanted to be sure that our first and primary trust was in God. So inside my wedding ring are the words "God love Andrew" to remind me that my first allegiance is to God and my commitment to Andrew flows from that prior commitment to love God with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. As the RCA liturgy puts it: "the great love God has shown for each of us allows us to love each other."

As I look back on those conversations now I think we were a little arrogant. We were, I think, rather proud of our clarity about those theological distinctions. I confessed to Andrew not long ago that the longer we are together, the more intertwined our lives become, the harder it is to imagine my life without him. And we've only been married a little over five years. I cannot fathom what it is like for those of you who have been together for twenty, forty, or even sixty years. While the deepening of our love and commitment is a great gift, I feel the challenge of these texts to keep that clarity of where my trust ultimately resides.

As I said before, making the decision to follow God doesn't mean that life ceases to happen. It simply changes the way we inhabit that life. We can still make lifelong commitments. We just understand that our partner is not the be all and end all of our existence in the way that God is. We still have

emotion. We grieve and feel joy. We just know that emotions do not endure in the way that God's presence and power in our life does. We still work and buy things, we are just clear that our finances and material possessions do not define us the way that our relationship to God does. Faced with the good news of God's grace, life re-orders itself and takes on new meaning. This is what Jesus was proclaiming....this is what God invited Jonah to proclaim.

So I've been thinking about what made Jonah so reluctant to bring this good news to Nineveh. It's not until chapter four that the truth emerges. The Ninevites have repented and God has offered them grace. Listen to the verses just after the passage we read from today: "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love..." It's funny how these words in the Psalms are cause for praise and thanksgiving. On Jonah's lips they are bitter because the steadfast love is being offered not just to him and his people but to these wretched Ninevites as well. In all fairness, you have to keep in mind that Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. They were enemies of Israel who stopped at nothing to bring about Israel's destruction. Think about the way the US feels about al-qaeda and you have a window into how Jonah feels about Nineveh.

This whole book would be funny – ok it is kind of funny – until you begin to realize how absolutely descriptive it is of human nature. The book of Jonah is prophetic because it speaks to the limitations God's people had begun to place on the grace of God. Israel was the chosen people. But they were chosen to be a light to all nations. What the book of Jonah reveals is how challenging it is to let that light genuinely reach into all nations... every corner of the world...without exception.

This story and these texts got me thinking about the limits we place on God's grace; the conditions we place on Christ's call; and why we place those conditions and limits. I once had a theology professor claim that for all the lip service we Protestants give to the concept of grace we really

resent grace. We prefer to believe that we deserve the good the things that come into our life; that we have earned them. That we are a product of our good choices and that God's love for us is at least *in part* due to the good things we have done to earn that favor. We don't often let ourselves know all this. It operates under the surface rather unconsciously. But this line of thinking is revealed in precisely the kind of situation that Jonah presents: when someone we think is beyond the pale finds themselves on the receiving end of God's grace. Our indignation and our resistance to play a part in those kinds of reconciliations betrays where we have truly placed our trust. Not in God. Not in grace. But in ourselves and our sense of justice and in our sense of righteousness. There are people we consider worth the effort and people we have written off as beyond hope, and those distinctions show up in the places we resist to go as ambassadors of Christ.

So who is it in your life that needs that second or hundredth chance? Where is your Nineveh - that place God is calling you to go that you'd just as soon run in the opposite direction? Be sure of this, no matter what we think, no matter how resistant we feel, God's kingdom is at hand. The question is: do you want to be part of it? If you open your eyes and look around; if you open your ears to listen, you will hear Jesus calling still: Come and follow me! What will be our response?