

Called by God—Part 2

“Called to the Growing Edges”

1 week ahead of lectionary (OT 3B/4B-17)

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

Mark 1: 14-20

Jan. 14, 2018

Rev. Rob Carter

Prayer for Illumination

We give thanks, O God of sacred stories,
for the witness of holy Scripture.

Through it, you nurture our imaginations, touch our feelings,
increase our awareness, and challenge our assumptions.

Bless, we pray, our hearing of your word this day.

Speak to each of us;

 speak to all of us;

 and grant that by the power of your Spirit,

 we may be hearers and doers of your word. Amen.

Called by God—Part 2 “Called to the Growing Edges”

I’m what you call a cradle Presbyterian. I’ve been one my whole life. And growing up the child of a Presbyterian church musician, going to church was never an option. So while I’ve certainly rebelled against the church... as well as against God... I’ve always been blessed to know a relationship with God. Even as a young child, I was blessed to know what we talked about last week... how in baptism we see the signs of God’s blessings... and the ways in which God names us and claims us, loves us and forgives us, equips us with gifts and calls us to use them.

As we explored, it’s the ultimate blessing of baptism—to find in the font what so many spend their whole lives searching for—identity and purpose. Identified as God’s beloved children, and blessed with the purpose of spending our lives for the love, the will, the way of God.

Now, that’s not to say that’s all there is to it. Now is it to imply that living into the gifts and call of God is simple. I don’t think it is. Which is why I so often struggle to relate to our Gospel lesson this morning. Always have. I just don’t know how they did it.

As Mark describes it, Jesus is walking along the shoreline, when he sees Simon and Andrew fishing in the sea. “Hey fellas,” he calls out, “Come follow me and I’ll make you fishers of people.” And “immediately,” Mark says, “immediately” they just drop their nets—symbols of their very way of life—and leave everything and everyone behind in order to follow Jesus.

A bit further down the coastline, Jesus sees two more brothers, James and John. They’re out fishing with their father Zebedee and a crew of others. Jesus calls out to them... and

immediately, James and John jump out of the boat to go and follow Jesus... just leaving their father sitting there.

.....

Frankly, I couldn't have done it. Could you? Some stranger you've never met, never even heard of calls you out, asks you to leave the life you'd always known—your work, your family, your friends—in order to follow him into a new way of life you'd never experienced before. Could you do that? Whether you are a cradle Christian or are approaching faith for the very first time.

Then again, we have to remind ourselves, we are here today. And believe it or not, that says something about you and your response to Christ's call. It reveals quite a bit, actually, of your response to baptism... and the identity and purpose God has placed within you.

I suppose my struggle is that I relate much more readily to Jonah's call. *Now, the portion we read from this morning was the third chapter of Jonah, in which the prophet actually gives in and follows God's call. We read the part in which Jonah actually does as he's asked, and prophecies a fierce warning to the people of Nineveh, who end up repenting—surprising both God and Jonah in the process.*

What we didn't read was how this whole ordeal began. In the first verse of the first chapter, we read, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'God at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee... from... the Lord."

I love it. God comes calling... asking Jonah to deliver an incredibly difficult message to a bunch of Assyrians—not Israelites, as Jonah was. And Jonah thinks better of it: "Mmmmm... Uh-uh. No thanks. Not gonna happen, God! I'm no dummy. If I go tell those people you're gonna sock it to 'em, they 're just gonna sock me!"

So he flees. He literally tries to run away from God's call—as if you can ever really hide from God.

But the truth is, friends, it's something we all do. Not necessarily as blatantly as Jonah did. I mean, we don't run and jump on the next cargo ship heading off to a foreign land. But in all transparency, who here hasn't tried to hide from God's call? It's something we do:

- every time we rationalize that we just don't have the time for that.
- every time we convince ourselves... "O God can't really expect little ol' *me* to do anything about big ol' *that*."
- every time we say something like, "but it'll cost too much time," or "it's too far away," or "it's just too complicated."
- every time we assume God isn't really asking us to be the vessels of God's kingdom our baptisms have already told us we are.

To be clear... we try to hide from our callings all the time.

.....

I remember sitting in a meeting at a church a good while ago, not here—talking about a new ministry our church had been asked to explore. The ministry was based in a rough place in

a rough city... because, frankly, that's where the ministry could do the most good for the most people. And this ministry was doing an awful lot of good, for an awful lot of people. So we began exploring various ways our congregation could participate on an ongoing basis, and the good it would do the people we serve... and the good it would do the people who get to do the serving.

But somewhere along the line, the conversation took a turn. "Well I just don't know," a voice said. "I make it a habit of never going to that part of the city."

Another chimed in, "You know, that's a good point. Should we really be asking our congregation to go there? Is it too dangerous?"

"Well, that's where the mission site is?" somebody explained.

"But is it worth it?" another asked.

"Is it worth it?" Is it worth the risk? Is it worth risking ourselves? Is serving this mission... is participating in the formation of the kingdom of God in this way within this place worth what it might cost us?"

Ultimately, we decided it wasn't worth the risk. And we hid from God. We didn't run away and jump on a boat, but make no mistake, we made a decision to hide from God's call when confronted with something new we preferred not to face.

The obvious casualties in this, of course, were all those who we could've served, but chose not.

But what often gets missed is that if we had chosen to go to that bad part of a bad town, the people who went and served would've been just as blessed as those they served. Because when God comes calling, God not only calls us to those who need us... God also calls us to our own growing edges. To the places we need to go. To the perspectives we need to see. That we might touch and experience and relate to people and places we need to see and touch and relate to in order to grow ourselves.

For when God comes calling, it's often a call away from our own nets, right? God tends to call us away from the familiar... from what we're used to... that we might experience a new perspective, a new possibility, in order to engage with new people or practice a new skill as we seek to grow closer to God... and closer to God's kingdom.

.....

Frankly, it's what many here at TPC are doing across these ensuing weeks, as we engage in a church-wide study of the book *Waking Up White*—a book our denomination's leaders have asked all church's to explore, as we seek to better understand our history and struggle amid race relations. A struggle and history we celebrate this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend... and the witness he provides as one who followed God's call to the horrifically uncomfortable... sometimes the brutally violent... but still, he followed God's call to lead our nation to one of its most important growing edges. And not just our nation... but the church, as well. And the church's role in building bridges of understanding between communities and people.

So I share, very transparently, that among the things I look forward to in these small groups are the conversations, which won't be easy; nor will they always be comfortable. For the book and its topic aren't light. I am very sure there will be things shared and discussed that will lead to disagreement... and dialogue... and exploration... and learning... and further sharing...

and growing. They're all the sort of things that occur along a growing edge... where we find ourselves growing closer to God and closer to others.

.....

Really, it's what discipleship is all about... following the call of God not only in service to God's people, but also in pursuit of our own formation... as we find the faith to step out onto *our* growing edges... to learn more about ourselves and others and our world... and God's grace within it... and so become more of the disciples and the community of faith God is calling us to be!

So when it comes to our discipleship, friends, we need to get real about our tendency to hide from God's call, and start facing up to the truth that God calls us to both the easy and the difficult. God calls us to the pleasant and the unpleasant. God calls us to the beautiful as well as the terribly ugly. Because God that's where God needs us! In all of it.

After all, where is light most needed, but in darkness? And where is love most needed, but amid need? And where is peace most needed, but in strife? So shouldn't we *expect* that the *uncomfortable* is exactly where we're called to go? That the challenging is exactly is what we need to do. That yes, God *is* calling us to risk ourselves in pursuit of God's kingdom.

.....

It's why Jesus left us this meal, friends. That here, at this table, amid *his* meal, we would see and touch and taste the bread and wine of Jesus' mission and ministry, and in celebrating his gifts... we would remember ours, and the mission and ministry we're called to carry forth in His name. Amen.