

Both our Old and New Testament texts for this morning continue the theme that Randy preached last week. The texts he read were about being called out by God. You may have noticed a similar theme today.

Jonah is one of my favorite prophets. Perhaps even one of my favorite books in the Hebrew Scriptures. Our text today is from the end of the story, so let's do a quick re-cap. Jonah is called by God to head to Nineveh, which is the modern city of Mosul, where we are fighting in Iraq. He's called there to preach a message of repentance. Jonah, like all good Israelites, hates the Ninevites. They are Assyrians. They have a nasty habit of invading and occupying Israel. They are enemies. They do not follow the God of Abraham. So Jonah has good reason to hear God's call and say, "sure, whatever." He then boards a ship bound for Tarshish, which is fine, except it is in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Perhaps Jonah thought God only wanted him to *say* he'd follow God's call. Perhaps **following through** on the call wasn't so important to God. In any case, you know what happens next—Jonah ends up in the belly of a fish. For 3 days. And he prays to God. Not the best prayer. He sort of begs while he also blames God for it all. But God answers his prayer and Jonah is unceremoniously spewed onto the beach.

And the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time. Jonah knows enough to follow the call this time, no matter his distaste for Nineveh. And he preaches a message that is devoid of grace or anything we would call Good News. "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" You get the sense that Jonah had a big smile on his face as he was announcing that news—looking forward to having a ringside seat to the overthrow.

But then these Godless heathens repent. All of them. The entire city. 120,000 people! And Jonah is just disgusted. "Are you kidding me? You're going to save these people? They aren't kosher. They don't come to church on Sunday. They don't know the Torah. And furthermore, I don't like them!"

It is really a beautiful piece of writing, because Jonah takes what is Israel's standard praise of God and turns it into a complaint. In the passage right after what we heard this morning, Jonah tells God, "For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." This is Woody Allen writing scripture.

But here is some of the good news in this passage.  
--God does not call us because we are perfect people. God calls Jonah, not once but twice, despite Jonah's complaints, disobedience, and bad attitude.  
--God's ability to save people does not depend on the eloquence of our speech. The people of Nineveh don't repent because Jonah is charismatic and well spoken. They seem to repent despite his mean spirit and bad attitude.

--Jonah didn't, at first, see this next one as good news, but here it is. ***God doesn't hate the same people we hate.***

--And the good news is not just good news for the people of Nineveh. When God calls Jonah to Nineveh, it ends up being good news for Jonah as well. I invite you to read through this book during the week. It is short—just 4 chapters. But God and Jonah have an interesting conversation. The text doesn't clearly tell us what happens to Jonah after the conversation with God, but it is our experience that encounters with grace can change people. When you realize that you've been loved, in spite of being unlovable, your heart expands a little. You understand that there is more room in it than you thought.

And we, like Jonah, are called by God too. Our lives may not be as dramatic. We may not be eaten by a fish. We might just be minding our own business, repairing our nets so we can go back to work fishing.

Wait. That sounds familiar. Where have I heard that? Oh yeah. The gospel lesson this morning. Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and he sees Simon and his brother Andrew fishing. He calls them to join him. He also calls James and his brother John.

Notice that there is nothing in the text that suggests there is anything remarkable about our 4 men who are invited by Jesus to follow him. As far as we know, they weren't selected because they were famous, or because they were rich, or because they had the ear of the emperor, or because they were better human beings than everyone else.

It appears they were called to discipleship because the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God had come near. Which is good news for us. It means that the kingdom of God is not dependent upon our success. The kingdom of God is already here and is what calls us into discipleship. How would we see the work of the church if, rather than being worried about succeeding and growing so the Kingdom of God can arrive, we instead saw the work of the church as living in response to the Kingdom arriving? In other words, we aren't called to fish for people to make some quota for God, but just to be who we are called to be.

The translation of this text from the Greek obscures part of Jesus' call to the disciples. The NRSV (and most other translations) read, "I will make you fish for people." The Greek text more closely translated would read, "I will make you become fishers". The difference is that the NRSV makes it sound as if Jesus is calling us to a task, to a job. The Greek makes clearer that he is calling them to a new identity. It isn't so much that they have one more new job to do, but that the whole identity of their lives have changed.

Because what did Simon and Andrew do in response to Jesus' call? They didn't say, "sounds great. We have a few hours on Sunday and maybe Tuesday nights for committee meetings that we can give to you."

They immediately left their nets and followed him. All of the work and money they invested in fishing for fish was abandoned on the seashore as they went off to this new identity. They may not have had any particular "fishers for people" skills or qualifications,

but they recognized that the trappings of their former lives would only get in the way. 50 pound test line and a nice fly reel were not going to help them live into their new identity. And the brothers James and John didn't just leave their nets, they left the family business. The fleet of "Zebedee and Sons" fishing boats are left with their father and the hired hands. Zebedee is going to have to redesign his business logo to "Zebedee but not his ungrateful sons who abandoned him." James and John walked away from family, family and societal expectations, and likely their inheritance.

So, it appears that we are being called to a new identity, not just a new hobby, in Christ. And to figure out what that looks like, I invite you to spend time in Mark's gospel this year. The preaching lectionary will move us in and out of Mark's gospel over the course of the year. And next week, the adult class will begin a study of Mark's gospel on Sunday mornings. What we'll discover is that these people who have responded to Jesus' invitation will witness unclean spirits being rebuked, sick people being healed, lepers being restored to health, Jesus challenging and teaching, and the journey to the cross. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you become fishers." This isn't one more task Jesus wants to add to your life. This is a whole new way of seeing yourself.  
Amen.