

“Would I Have Answered When You Called”

Jonah 3:1 – 5, 10; Mark 1:14 – 20

“Would I have answered when you called, ‘Come, follow, follow me!’?
Would I at once have left behind both work and family?
Or would the old familiar round have held me by its claim
And kept the spark in my heart from bursting into flame?”

Today we have heard another call story from the scriptures, the call of Jonah to speak to the people of Ninevah, to tell them to turn from their ways, to face God. We also heard the call of Jesus to the disciples in the Gospel of Mark.

And here we are, 21st century people. What do these ancient, ancient stories have to say to us, gathered here in this sanctuary in downtown Oakland? I would suggest that the stories are as relevant to us today as they were to those who first heard the stories, spoken or perhaps read. We don’t know much about Ninevah or the people who lived in that huge city, which took 3 days to walk across. If we took I-980, which passes by West Oakland and downtown Oakland, it would only take a few minutes, since there is not much traffic on that broad sweep across the city. But Jonah was warned that it would take 3 days. So he had a big job to do, all this after coming out of the belly of the big whale.

And the disciples, centuries later, are called, as well, by Jesus. We often wonder how they simply turned their back on their work to follow him. I think that makes us hesitant to see how the call can be followed in our own lives. Have you answered the call? Have you turned – literally turned – from believing in the voices in your head to the ones that are quietly calling from your heart?

While being a fisherman is certainly hard work, it must also be satisfying. My friend from London, Tone McWilliams, grew up on the coast of the great Atlantic, in St. Ives, Cornwall. After college, Tone entered the monastery, believing that was his call in life. He stayed in the monastery for a few years, and then a yearning for another life entered his mind, again and again. It’s hard to leave a cloistered life, where all your needs are cared for, but that’s what he did. Not knowing exactly how he was going to begin his adult life all over again, Tone returned to St. Ives, and for the first year out of the monastery he worked as a fisherman on the sea. The work was hard, physically hard, and often he was sick. When he awoke before 4 in the morning to begin another day at sea, he would often be sick before he got out of bed. But in those harsh northern Atlantic waters, Tone began his new life.

Tone is one of the most faithful practicing people of faith I know. One of the stories he has told me – and he loves to tell stories (Pat, his wife, likes to say that she is Pat, the woman who is married to Tone, the man who knows everything!) is about the time their Roman Catholic parish was sent a new priest. From the first, Tone did not like the looks of the man! Tone had a hard time concentrating on the man’s words when he was in Mass. Finally, Tone decided that since he couldn’t even look at the man, he would sit quietly in Mass, close his eyes, so that he didn’t have to see the priest. When he began to do that, Tone noticed a curious thing! He began to hear things he hadn’t heard before – things coming from the priest. So Tone left Mass again, carrying something useful for his life with him.

Tone’s life is a story of call. It wasn’t satisfaction that led Tone to pursue another call. It wasn’t that his ego was satisfied when people who knew his family would nod, with honor, to know that one of the sons had gone into the monastery to serve God. Rather, it was dissatisfaction that led Tone to turn another way in his life.

Maybe you are dissatisfied today. Maybe you are frustrated, or depressed, or somehow restless. Those things are the call on your soul, yes, on your soul.

We often get so focused on what the disciples had to give up that we forget what they received by following Jesus. It is easier to give up what you know when you begin to know what that “turning,” or “repentance” – that choosing to relate to God in your life – will bring.

I remember a time in my own life – I can remember vividly exactly the place I was, driving my Dodge Colt into the alley of my apartment building on Martin Drive in Milwaukee, when I yelled – I yelled to God that I was ready to surrender. At that moment, the uncertainty of knowing where God would lead me was more compelling than the loneliness and dissatisfaction of the life I was living. I didn’t know what answering the call would mean; perhaps it would mean giving up all that I knew, giving up pretty things and good friends and an apartment to myself. I simply didn’t know.

In the end, what God allowed me to give up, to surrender, was a life without meaning, without depth, without drama, as well. God has called me to forgive myself in the deepest way, to accept myself and my own gifts, and to see the gifts in others.

That, my friends, is repentance. Pain and dissatisfaction with life as it is are the doors that invite us to turn. It wasn’t the great hauls of fish the disciples wanted to leave behind; what they wanted to leave behind were the days spent longing for something more, even though life was good.

Hard times cause people to repent. When things are going our way – when the church is growing, when times are good, when we can buy a house without backing it up, when everyone says: “Yes, “ we don’t repent. Our need causes us to repent.

We only leave those nets behind when there isn’t anything else, when we’re stuck in the belly of the fish, and we want out!

I can imagine Jonah looking at a distance to that busy and big city of Ninevah. How do I tackle this? How do I do what I have been asked to, to call this city to repentance? How? That’s a question for our time. How do we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world when we haven’t been doing that for generations? How? One person at a time? How? By telling your story, of what God has done for you.

We begin, one person at a time. When was the last time you were so excited about the growth in faith you are having that you asked someone you love to come to church with you, so that they will know this faith? When did you tell someone what God is doing for you in your life? When did you tell someone what saying yes to God has meant for your life?

The problem in all of this is that when you repent, when you turn your life toward God, things change. Surely Tone’s family – his proud mother and father, for example, couldn’t have taken it easily when he decided to leave the monastery, which after all, is what we associate with call. But his dissatisfaction, his yearning, his call actually led him out of the monastery! How awful is that?

I’m convinced that most of us don’t grow, we don’t trust ourselves to God, because it would mean that our most central relationships will change. We don’t want to listen to our dissatisfaction because that would call into question all we learned at the knee of our father. I can imagine Peter’s father saying: What the heck are you doing? Fishing is a good job! Think of the money you can make!”

Often we will say to one another: "My father always said," and the sentence is completed. When we are still living out of what we learned as a child, when we haven't questioned the wisdom of our family of origin, then we have not grown. If our adult life is not calling us to wonder what this lingering sadness and longing is about, then we aren't about to turn toward God!

I am convinced that the world needs us, one person at a time, to repent, to begin a revolution of living, of being. All our best thinking has not solved the world's problems. So what do we have to lose?