

The Time is Now

Third Sunday After the Epiphany, 24 January 2021

Jonah 3:1-5,10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

St Paul's Free Methodist Church

I wonder if you've ever gotten a personal word from God and ignored it. Maybe you felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit to go and talk to someone like Philip did in the book of Acts. Or maybe you just couldn't get to sleep at night because of a stirring in your heart like Samuel. Or maybe you were visited by an angel, like Mary; or strangers like Abraham at Mamre, or Peter at Joppa, and you knew that if you received these guests your life as you knew it would never be the same. Or maybe you've been given a message like Jonah and you ran like crazy in the other direction. I wonder if you've ever been given a mission from God and ignored it.

Today we hear how the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. It came a second time because the first time, Jonah ignored it. In fact, he ran, sailed, and swam from God so fast that God sent a fish to swallow him up in his rebellion. Jonah would rather die than heed the word of the Lord. And what was this word from the Lord that was so bad it was better to die than obey? It was to share with the Ninevites a word of repentance, which Jonah knew was a word of mercy and hope.

Now Ninevah was a major city in Assyria, and it was the Assyrians who had conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 bce. Here we are, probably two hundred years later, but the enmity between Israel and Assyria still ran hot. This means then that Jonah's word from the Lord was a word of warning for Israel's enemies. And Jonah was not at all interested in warning his enemies, thank you very much. He wanted them to pay for their wickedness. No pardons. No commutations. No get out of jail free cards. The Assyrians must pay and Jonah wanted God to overthrow their city.

What ends up happening is exactly what Jonah feared: God changed his mind. Later in chapter four, Jonah prays (my paraphrase),
See God! That's why I bolted in the first place. I knew you're gracious, merciful, slow to anger, overflowing with love, and always looking for a way not to punish. Kill me now; I'd rather be dead (4:2). Jonah knew God was like this, because after all, God had given *him* a second chance. But the Ninevites needed to hear the word of the Lord only once, and they went all out in turning from their evil ways. Young and old, great and small, the King and the slave. Everyone fasted from food and water and was covered in sackcloth in repentance; even the animals! And Jonah was fuming. How dare God show mercy to his enemies!

Our readings today help us see that God's invitation to repentance is a word of mercy and hope that makes possible a new life. This is the word of the Lord for us this Third Sunday after the Epiphany. What I'd like to do this morning is show how this invitation to repentance in the Jonah account becomes, through the life of Jesus and ministry of the church, an invitation to

follow Jesus. The call to repentance becomes an invitation to discipleship. And this invitation is urgent.

Mark's Gospel is the fastest paced of all the Gospels. Not only is it the shortest, not only does it plunge us right into the middle of the story, not taking a moment for Jesus's birth or childhood and jumping straight to Jesus as a grown man, but it also underlines the urgency of Jesus's ministry as Mark repeatedly uses the word "immediately" (*euthus*) to tell his story. It's as though Jesus is on the clock, racing from one village to the next, one person to the next, with an urgent message to share before the buzzer: *the kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe in the good news* (Mk 1:15). It's no accident that the symbol Christians have long used for Mark's Gospel is a lion. And this lion is on the move.

What Mark makes clear from the get-go is that the good news, the *euangelion*, the gospel is that the kingdom of God has come near. The gospel, according to Jesus in Mark is that the kingdom of God has come near; repent for living otherwise and lean into it. No more running, no more sailing or swimming, no more ignoring or sleeping or suppressing or distracting ourselves from Jesus's announcement and invitation.

I've always been gripped by Mark's story of Jesus calling his first disciples. It happens so quick. There's no prior relationship or story that makes sense of it. The way Mark tells it, Jesus is a complete stranger who strolls by the sea where they were fishing and working, says "let's roll," and *immediately* they drop everything to follow him. They leave their work, their boats, their livelihood, even their families, and follow Jesus. Just like that. Just like the Ninevites repented after hearing from Jonah. Just like that. I wonder what their wives thought. We know at least that Simon was married. Maybe when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law, his wife came around. But what we see here is a sense of urgency, a sense of immediacy, both in Jesus's calling and in the disciples' following.

I wonder if you feel the same sense of urgency about following Jesus. Maybe you have decided to follow Jesus in a general sense, but the particulars are just going to need to wait. *I wonder if you've ever heard a personal word from the Lord and ignored it.* Or maybe you've just put it off until things lighten up a bit. Maybe you're in a busy patch of life and hope to get to it soon. Or maybe you've gotten in the habit of following Jesus out of your excess, once all your other commitments are fulfilled, your bills are paid, your papers are turned in.

Today we learn that if this is you, you may be too late. Jesus is passing along; he's not standing by. Jesus is on the move. I wonder if this is the sole criterion Jesus used in picking his twelve disciples: he called them to follow and they did. *Immediately.*

In case we are inclined to chalk this up to an idiosyncrasy of Mark's Gospel, our lectionary readings today stop us short. Paul has the same sense of urgency. *The appointed time has grown short*, he tells us. *The present world is passing away.* In his letter to the church in Corinth Paul addresses a great many issues of daily life, from marriage to lawsuits to food. In our passage today, Paul reminds us that the kingdom of God has come near, or in his words, the

present world is passing away. This means that our discipleship is of paramount importance. Following Jesus, according to Paul, is not something that can wait til the weekend like a home repair. Following Jesus is an attention-demanding, urgent-calling that requires our immediate response. Why? Because the present world is passing away. Everything: our jobs, our things, our families, and even our marriages are passing away. Discipleship is NOW.

In their book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon propose that the only reason why a Christian should either stay single or get married is that it somehow enhances their discipleship. Based on his discussion of marriage, the Apostle Paul would certainly agree. Following Jesus is EVERYTHING. And today our readings implore us to drop our things, holdups, excuses, distractions, pettiness toward our enemies, even our respectable obligations, and follow Jesus NOW.

Fortunately, Jesus's call to discipleship is a communal call. He's calling *us*. While we're a collection of individuals, Jesus is calling us to follow him *together*, not as lone rangers. Not even Paul ministered alone. Friendship is not accidental to the Christian life, it's essential. We need each other to follow Jesus. We need each other to have the courage to drop our nets or quit our job or leave our father to follow Jesus. The church is the community that makes it possible for us to follow Jesus immediately, together.

At our Coffee Talk last Thursday night, Pastor Ayebale shared about his personal calling to lead the church. Pastor Ayebale and our pastoral team are committed to Paul's vision of the church as many members of one body, each with different gifts and particular callings. With these gifts and callings, we are all called to follow Jesus as disciples, together.

Our hope and prayer for this church, this community of Christians we call St. Paul's, is that we will follow Jesus together immediately, not delaying discipleship even a moment because, friends, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news!*