

Leaving It All
Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Mark 1.14-20
Sunday, January 21, 2018
Epiphany 3B
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"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go 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 to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." (Jonah 1.1-3a) It's the story not just of a reluctant prophet but of a simultaneously convincing and lousy one. It's the story of people who are far from God and need to repent, though no one first hearing the tale expects repentance. Listeners expect a horrible ending and a proud, slightly smug prophet who can "I told you so" under the little shade tree God gave him for comfort. But (after a detour in the belly of a fish by way of Joppa) this simultaneously convincing and lousy prophet is effective in his preaching. The lives of the people are transformed as the people of Ninevah all the way up to the king and down to the animals fast, pray, and repent. They change direction and reorient their lives toward God.

At some level, Jonah almost relishes the thought they may be destroyed because his reaction to God's grace and forgiveness is grotesque. He didn't want to even go to the town because they weren't "his" people, and he strongly suspected that God would claim them in spite of their dirty, wandering otherness. Finally, he preaches. The people repent. And then God changes God's mind and honors their change of heart with a Divine change of heart. It is a calling that reorders everything and realigns a people with their God, even if it breaks the prophet's spirit.

In the next breath, we hear a different story with every bit the same demands of reorientation and flipping life on its head. In Mark's gospel is the call of Jesus to Simon and Andrew and James and John, "Come and follow me." Jesus issues an invitation to change direction, and it requires walking away from old life; leaving nets and boats. Relinquishing certainty and ritual, habits of comfort. They men leave it all immediately to join a movement.

In his book *Missing the Mark*, Mark Biddle describes the thematic definitions of sin throughout scripture. One of those themes is the temptation for humankind to over function and attempt to live as their own gods. The other is the tendency for humankind to under function and live beneath the fullness of their humanity, expecting

and imagining less for themselves than God does. Treating each other with less respect and love and kindness and compassion than God holds for us. Yes, only one of these texts talks about people in need of repentance because of wickedness. There's certainly nothing wicked about four men dutifully working hard each day at the family fishing trade. However, both of our texts show us images of people being invited to change their life's path. In these texts today, we have images of people who are living beneath the fullness of humanity. Whether totally lost to wickedness or just keeping time in the daily loop of work and home, their lives are not honoring the image of God within them. And while there is absolutely no mention of sin or repentance in Mark's call story, it seems the men on the boat are somehow not living into the fullness of their humanity. They are invited into a better way. Maybe they sense it because they IMMEDIATELY drop their nets and run.

I'd say you and I spend a lot of time living out the latter story. What habits bring us comfort but aren't life giving? It could be that something big comes to mind right now, but it also helps to think smaller: a relationship that make us feel worse about ourselves and not better. Consistently working, serving, and volunteering out of duty and obligation rather than passion. Social habits of our culture that make us sick and less than the fullness of our humanity.

The challenge for us in both of these stories is the realization that walking toward something, by necessity, requires walking away from something else. Taking something into your hands requires releasing whatever you're already holding. The men drop their nets, jump off the boat, and step onto the Jesus path. They turn. They step forward in boldness. And they leave the familiar flow of work and home behind.

Stepping toward a fullness of self requires we let go of everything that is too small for us and holding us back. Stepping into a centered passion requires we let go of everything that distracts and keeps us mindlessly busy. Stepping toward boldness of speech and action for what is right requires releasing a fear of offending and an anxious need to keep the peace.

Think about what that might look like in your own life. Yes, these words are to us as a people, but let's also get personal and specific today. I know there are relationships in my life that drain me and do not feed me. I want to cultivate a few, deep relationships that are mutually nourishing, foster creativity, and inspire us to grow rather than a dozen shallow relationships that are overflowing with comparison competition. I have learned for myself that Twitter and Facebook annihilate my time with distraction, so I have to keep them in their place. If I want centered passion, I can't have a screen in front of me all day with news flashes and life flashes. For me, it drags me to a lesser

version of myself and away from the fullness of my humanity. And I'm growing into my peacemaker identity as I slowly release my Southern peace keeper persona—polite at all costs. I'm remembering that peace, like war, must be waged. To be kind and true is not the same thing as being complicit and polite. How about you? What are your growing edges? What do you sense God is calling you to step toward? And what will that require you let go or step away from?

Repentance, as we usually think of it, is very much what happens when "the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." (Jonah 3.5) But repentance is the turning of heart and mind, not the sackcloth and ashes. The sackcloth and ashes are the ritual they created to mark the turning. In this story, Jonah changes his mind in the belly of the fish. Granted, most of us would. The people of Nineveh reorient their minds after hearing the prophetic word from the begrudging prophet. And God changes God's mind after the people change theirs.

It's disturbing to me that the parable begins with God's willingness to smite the people of Ninevah. What if the people of Ninevah weren't aware of how far from the path of God they were? What if they were just functioning from certainty and ritual and habits of comfort? I think Jonah doubts God's smiting capacity because he's running away by the second verse of the story. And once both people and God begin changing their minds, well, this is when Jonah gets made because God is too compassionate. As the psalmist says, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," (Psalm 103.8), and Jonah quotes these words sarcastically saying, "I knew it all along." Jonah rails against God and says, "*This is why I didn't want to go on this fool's errand in the beginning. I knew you were too soft to destroy those people who deserve it. Just kill me now, God.*"

And there we have a connection to the stories of calling from last week. You'll remember: God speaks to the boy Samuel and not the priest Eli; Jesus calls the arrogant Nathanael who cannot believe anything good comes from Nazareth. God moves and speaks and invites and calls in ways and places we cannot imagine. And sometimes God's eternally broad capacity to call and bless and welcome and love and forgive doesn't inspire us and compel us. Sometimes the notion of that kind of love offends us. Sometimes it disgusts us to think that God loves and calls *those people* just as God loves and calls me.

Melissa Bane Sevier calls Jonah out for the root problem of his behavior. She writes, "Jonah's problem is that he is a racist and a nationalist. My people don't like Ninevites or any Assyrians. We have long been enemies. They have a different religion. They are

of a different race. They are not Hebrews. Since they are not *my* people, they cannot possibly be *God's* people. That is where we all go wrong...Just as Jonah was a lousy prophet, we have become lousy theologians."¹

Maybe an element of the necessary reorientation of our minds and changing of our hearts is an expanding notion of who God loves and how God moves through people not like us. Living into the fullness of our humanity. Releasing that which holds us back from our true calling. Loving and anticipating the goodness of God in people who aren't like us. It's all really just a lot, maybe too much, and I feel certain we're ALL OF US reluctant to say "yes" to this kind of expansive calling.

St. Augustine is famously quoted as saying, "Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet." That is surely true for us. Make us pure of heart, O God. Make us focused and passionate about being your people. Make us fully ourselves in a deep way that allows us to see and honor the image of God in everyone. But later. Slowly. In fits and starts. Not all at once. And maybe when we're really old and can be centered and passionate and loving and non-judgmental for a few wise years. We want to live with in this expansive love, but maybe not just yet.

Then there's the "immediately" of Mark.²

The great preacher Karoline Lewis writes, "'[I]mmediately' can be less about marking time and more about describing action. Immediately does not only designate a *when* but a *what*. Not only a place in time, but an event that changes the meaning of life. Granted, the disciples have no clue at this point how life has been changed. But we know. And maybe immediately is all we can do, all we can manage. Because, preparation? Maybe it makes faith matters worse. Builds up anticipation, expectations. And then, when things do not go as planned? Maybe a life of faith can only happen in immediately, in the surprising, sudden, profound epiphany of God at work, God revealed in our lives...We are called...to take Mark's immediately seriously."³

The Ninevites do this with their sackcloth and ashes. Immediately, they are marking themselves as changed and changing people. Simon and Andrew and James and John

¹ "Ninevah, That ****hole Place", Melissa Bane Sevier: <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2018/01/15/nineveh-that-hole-place/>

² "The Immediately of Epiphany", Karoline Lewis: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3500>

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3500>

do this with speed as they drop what they're holding and launch themselves onto the Jesus path.

Melissa Bane Sevier reminds us that this change of heart, waking up, and accepting the call to follow may also be more subtle. "We may need to remind ourselves of this obvious fact: not everyone is called to leave the boats and nets, to leave family and place. The vast majority of us are called to stay where we are as we serve God. But at the same time, the calling of Jesus all through the gospels is to get out of our comfort zone, to recognize that while we are to keep on fishing right where we are, we must do it consciously...We [must] allow our own faith and assumptions to be upended by new ideas and new experiences. We [must] tread lightly on the earth."⁴

God calls us still. It may be a radical reorientation like the Ninevites in which we are lighting a candle and burning the letters and throwing out the old to make beautiful space for the new. It really may require we walk away from old habits and routine and familiar life to fully inhabit the new one that gives us space to expand into who God created us to be.

Or maybe the call of God in your life is the more subtle invitation to wake up to who you have been created to be.

To pay attention to the image of God in others and in creation.

To challenge the structures and patterns of our culture when they are too small, too restrictive, too oppressive.

To seek justice even when, or especially when, it isn't comfortable and it costs you something.

To live kindly with yourself and with your neighbors.

To tread lightly in realization that life itself is gift.

To wake up every day and every moment expecting God to surprise you.

Change your mind. Reorient your heart. Come and follow this way that welcomes you onto the path of God. Amen.

⁴ <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/armchair-travelers/>