

Mark 1:14-20  
3 Epiphany year B

“Hear I am, send Aaron”

Have you ever been asked to do something that you really didn't want to do? You were flattered to be asked, but what you wanted to do was run away – like Jonah did when God asked him to go to Nineveh. Jonah's refusal was the start of his great adventure in the belly of the whale, which ended with Jonah doing what God had asked anyway.

Put yourself back into one of those moments in your life. My first memorable experience (there have been more than one!) was in fifth grade. Our teacher announced that on the last day before spring break, we would do something different – hold a panel discussion. She talked a bit about what a panel was, and the issue to be discussed. I think she had in mind something like a debate. Inexplicably, the night before, the teacher appointed me to be the moderator. In fifth grade, you didn't tell the teacher ‘no.’

I went home feeling terrified. I vaguely knew about moderators from watching “I've Got a Secret” and “What's My Line” – vintage quiz shows of a certain age. How was I supposed to do that? I persuaded my parents to let me stay home from school the next day, since it was the start of school break and nothing important would happen anyway. I did not say the real reason.

So, yes, I ran, mostly because I did not know how to do what I was asked to do. When I weighed the possibility of making a fool of my fifth grade self against the ego of having been selected for the job – well, protecting ego won.

Scripture is full of stories about God's call, and initial denials and refusals. The childless Abram and Sarai (Abraham and Sarah) laughed at the idea of becoming the parents of a great nation. Moses was concerned about his speech and suggested God call on his brother Aaron instead. Samuel did not even recognize that the Lord was speaking *to him*.

God's call to action – and we ignore, refuse or dally.

Instead of ‘*here I am Lord,*’ our response is often, ‘*who, me?*’ Or some other variation of Moses' response, ‘*Here I am, send Aaron.*’

Reflecting on our human response to God's call: there is ego– we are honored, pleased to be thought of in a special way. Countervailing, there is the concern that we will fail, look foolish for our lack of knowledge, or skills, or gifts. Failure or success, we expect to be judged.

We forget to trust that God will provide what we need, to do what is asked. We are stuck in an assumption that our life is just about us, not something bigger or more important, however undefined that bigger might be.

Consider Jonah's story. Nineveh was the Assyrian capital, the enemy camp at its most powerful and wicked. Mosul is the modern-day Nineveh, built adjacent to the ruins on the banks of the Tigris River. Mosul has historically been a place of great upheaval. Modern day suspicions and animosities of the Middle East – ISIS, the Kurds, the Iraqis – probably match up quite well with ancient Nineveh.

When God asks Jonah to prophecy a warning to save the Ninevites from destruction, it is not surprising that Jonah wants nothing to do with that. Why save his enemies? The Ninevites did not believe in the Hebrew God, why should Jonah care whether they were destroyed or not?

Jonah refuses, sails off in the opposite direction to escape God, encounters a huge storm, sacrifices himself to the sea to save the crew, and is swallowed by a whale – then vomited up on the shores outside of Nineveh. Where, (I imagine a delightfully ironic voice here) *'the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'*

Reluctantly, Jonah does what God asks – and nothing more. He does not mention God. Not even a word. Just, *'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.'* Jonah sits down to watch what will happen next. The people put on sackcloth and fast, turning from their evil ways, and *God changed his mind about the calamity... and he did not do it.* Jonah is displeased with God's (in)action, sulking, petulant, and, as he says, 'angry enough to die'. He even admits he didn't want to prophecy because he knew God was merciful and would forgive the Ninevites, Israel's enemies. Jonah's agenda, vs. God's.

Of course, there was that small matter of ancient Israel being called to be a light to all nations – could that mean being a light to one's enemies? We should learn from that. Who is 'them' in our perspective, what is the worst we can dredge up to say about 'them' to compare to the best we can say about 'us'? That's the sort of comparison that presently permeates our national discourse about refugees and immigration reform. The worst about 'them' vs. the best about 'us.'

Jonah's story invites us to care about 'them' because God does.

Well, so ends Jonah's story. Hopefully, we see the story-teller's point – God makes use of the unlikely, the reluctant, to accomplish God's purposes. Jonah is the insider, who hears God's word and repeatedly disobeys. God's purposes will be accomplished anyway.

The Gospel of Mark adds dimension to this subject of God's call – the difference between task and identity. In the NRSV translation (which we read today), Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, *follow me and I will make you fish for people.* The older King James version translates this way, *come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.*

There is a difference, more important than gender inclusiveness. The difference, I think, favors

the King James version. To me, to fish for people, instead of fishing for fish, describes changing tasks. Imagine the discussion at the church's Bishop Committee meeting, *I can fish on Monday, if you can take Tuesday, and you Wednesday...*and so forth.

But becoming 'fishers of men' – ah, that's about changing one's identity. Simon and Andrew are called to do more than add a task to their busy lives. They are called to a new way of being, they are asked to leave behind the matrix of work, family and place, and follow Jesus wherever he leads. We know from Scripture that Simon Peter's home becomes a hospitality base for Jesus' ministry – family is not abandoned. But, Simon's and Andrew's *identities* are re-formed around Jesus, and they become disciples.

Identity is who you are and how you are, not just what you do. Identity is your way of life. I can think of lots of examples, you might as well.

Do you worship on Sundays as task, or as Christian identity? Do you hide your 'Christian' self when volunteering at the Red Door, or other secular gathering places? Do you express yourself with reference to God when God comes to mind? I am not talking about proselytizing, but – easy example – whether you filter your language for fear you might offend your secular or non-Christian friends.

Do you come to the monthly meeting of the Pastoral Care Circle as task, or does your pastoral identity lead you out in the community to listen to and engage strangers and neighbors, family, in a new way?

Again, I am not talking about evangelizing as that is understood traditionally, but whether you bring your Christianity with you as a natural part of who you are. Are you a fisher, or do you fish on occasion? Probably some of each if we are honest with ourselves.

Reading these two scriptures together – Jonah and Jesus' call to Andrew and Simon – I am heartened by the message. God's purposes will be accomplished whether I am a fisher – or I fish, even reluctantly, and only on occasion.

Some of us would like to be prophetic voices – *here I am Lord! Send me!* It's easy to get excited about the *idea of being* a prophet (there's that ego piece), and forget that being a prophet is about *identity* in the sense of God's timing, God's mission and God's ministry. Not about pursuing our favorite cause or idea, and certainly not our ego.

I conclude that the key to faithfulness is our responsiveness to God's call, to God's love, to doing things God's way. Even when we want to say no and run the other way, or follow our own agenda, or respond 'I am busy right now'.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, 'when the appointed time has grown short.' Paul was talking about the second coming. Two thousand years later, I find it easier to relate in the sense of aging, our

days being numbered. Paul's words raise the idea of God's time, versus our own.

If we wait to do something (like answer Jesus' call!) until we are ready, and we wait until we have made all the appropriate plans, and we wait until we have time, we will probably never go.

God's call does not come when we are ready – the call comes when it's inconvenient, when we have something else to do. When we are busy with children, career, or retirement plans. Think, identity: God's call is not about taking on another task.

Perhaps, like Jonah's experience, the call will be to do something we think is ill-advised, or even futile. Like expecting us to care for our enemies, because God does.

After the service today we will reassemble for our annual meeting. What do we hear God calling us – collectively as Christ Church and individually– to do? What is our continued collaborative commitment? What actions shall we take up that reflect our faith?

Amen

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