

Epiphany 3 Year B 2021
January 24, 2021

In today's readings, we hear several call stories—stories in which God has set people apart to do God's work in the world. But the stories we hear today are very much the "cleaned up" versions of these stories, and this is particularly true of our reading from Jonah, which many of us know is a far messier story than today's reading suggests.

All we hear from Jonah's story today is that God has called Jonah a second time to tell him to go to Nineveh and proclaim a message of repentance. So, Jonah gets up and goes, proclaims the message, the people repent, and God shows mercy. The end. It's a nice, wholesome, simple story. Except it's never that simple. You and I both know that there's more to the story. And the truth is that when God calls us, it's almost always to work that will challenge us and lead us into messy and uncertain situations.

Jonah's story is a prime example of this messiness. At the very beginning of the story, the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, calling him to go to Nineveh. But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian nation, an enemy and conqueror of the Jewish people. Of course Jonah didn't want to go there! Not many people would. So, instead of listening to God, Jonah decided to get on a boat and travel in the complete opposite direction. God brought a storm upon the sea, and everyone on the boat was terrified, except for Jonah, who was fast asleep. After the captain woke Jonah, they cast lots to see who was to blame for the storm. The lot fell on Jonah, and Jonah told them that he was fleeing from God. He told them that they should throw him into the sea, and the storm would cease. After attempting everything else they could think of, the sailors took Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the storm ceased. But God provided a big fish to swallow up Jonah, and the story tells us that he was in the belly of the fish for three days. Jonah prayed to God from inside the fish, and God delivered him. The fish spit Jonah out upon dry land. Jonah hasn't had it particularly clean and easy so far.

This is where today's reading from Jonah picks up. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, and this time he listens. But he's not too happy about it. He proclaims ever so briefly to Nineveh their doom, yet the Ninevites still are moved to repentance. The king, all the people and even the animals put on sackcloth and fast and cry to God, in hopes that God might change God's mind. And, when God sees that the Ninevites have repented, God decides not to destroy their city. This is perhaps the only clean and clear part of the story.

And this could be the end of the story. Jonah did his job, and we see how the Ninevites and God respond. But remember, life is messy. From the very beginning when Jonah fled God's call, to the end of the story now, life is messy. At the end of this story, we get to check in with Jonah. After Jonah did his job, and saw that God did not destroy the city, Jonah was angry. He prayed that God would either kill him or destroy the city anyway. Jonah was so angry, that he wanted to die. But God preserved his life. And at the end of the story, we hear again that God is concerned not only with Jonah, but also with all the people of Nineveh.

I love the story of Jonah. I love it because it seems like such a human story, it is very relatable. And it shows exactly how messy life really is. Sometimes God calls us and we don't want to do what God wants. Because sometimes God calls us to do things that aren't particularly desirable. And sometimes God calls us to do things we don't completely understand.

Jonah's story is not unique. Jesus often asked the disciples to do things they were unsure about or didn't understand too. I'm sure it wasn't exactly easy for the disciples to simply leave their whole life and follow Jesus. They probably left families and businesses and money behind.

James and John, whom we heard about today, left their nets and their father in their boat and followed. Life was probably going pretty smoothly for them before Jesus came around. As fishermen, money may not have been abundant, but at the very least, they probably lived a predictable and routine life. But then Jesus came, and they heard God's call, and the disciples couldn't do anything but follow. They left things in a mess, and they joined an unpredictable, scary, and sometimes even dangerous journey with God.

This is what being called by God looks like. It's not always pretty or clean. For Jonah, it meant living in the belly of a fish for three days, and then watching God have mercy on his enemies. For the disciples, it meant leaving everything familiar behind and following Jesus into the unknown. When God calls us, it means doing things we wouldn't choose to do otherwise.

Certainly, we could find other things to do with our money if God didn't call us to give it to the church. Certainly, we could find other things to do with our time if God didn't call us to serve those in need. Certainly, we could spend our Sunday mornings somewhere else, or share our gifts in different ways. Following God's call means making choices that aren't always easy. Following God's call means doing things that aren't always what we want to do.

So, we might run from God's call. We might try to ignore God. We might try and convince ourselves that serving the church and the world really isn't all that important. But God keeps calling. God calls to us through other people, God calls to us through events in our lives, God calls to us through scripture, and God calls to us as we pray and listen for God.

So, as we pray the Lord's Prayer each Sunday and throughout the week, we ask, "Thy will be done". We pray that God will turn us from our own selfish ways, so that God's will may be done in all the earth. "Your will be done, O God, not my own." We pray that God will call us, and continue to call us, despite the times when we, like Jonah, run in the opposite direction, or fail to listen to God's Word. And God does call us.

And that is why all of us are a part of this community. God has called each of us in baptism, and God continues to call us every day. God calls us to worship each Sunday and hear God's Word—even when we have to do it virtually. God calls us to confess in worship that we *have* turned from God, that we have failed to listen. God calls us in worship to hear God's words of forgiveness that stem from the waters of baptism. God calls us in worship to sing praises to the One who speaks in our lives. God calls us in worship to receive God's abundant gift of life. God calls us to worship so that we might be strengthened and sent out again in mission to the world.

We are a part of this community because God has called each of us. And God continues to call us, each and every day, to turn from our individual wants and desires, and to join as a community so we can serve the church and the world. God's call may not be to something desirable or easy, we may not be perfectly willing to follow God's call, but God keeps calling. And God works through us and our messy lives to accomplish God's will for this world. And so we give thanks that God remains steadfast with us, calling us, and working in us for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.