

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Call of Johah and the Apostles

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We are beginning ordinary time with stories of how God calls people. Last week we heard the stories of the call of Samuel, and then John's version of the calling of the first disciples. Today we hear the story of the call of Jonah followed by Mark's version of the call of the first disciples.

The story of Jonah is one of the few comical stories in the Bible. And its juxtaposition with the call of the first disciples only serves to highlight its humor. However our selection has cut out the humor. So let me remind you of the full story. Our story begins with the second call of Jonah. For Jonah's response to the first call was to run the other direction as fast and as far away as he could. God calls Jonah to pick himself up and travel east to the imperial city of Nineveh to warn them that if they do not repent their evil ways they will be destroyed.

Jonah responds by jumping onto the first ship heading west. For you see Jonah hates the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of the mighty and ruthless Assyrian empire. In their aggressive expansion towards Egypt the Assyrians had already destroyed the Northern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel; squashed it like a bug. The only reason Assyria did not conquer Judah as well was because it was too small and out of the way to be worth the trouble. They started to but fever swept through the camp and the Ninevites decided to call it off and head back home.

So God's call to Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh would be like him calling on a Jew in the early forties to go to Berlin and warn the Nazis to repent or be destroyed. First it would be a suicide mission, second it would be spitting in the wind, and third, who wants to save the Nazis from what they have coming to them? If anybody deserves to go to Hell, surely its them.

But as you all know it is Jonah's attempt to run away from the Lord's

call that ended up amounting to spitting in the wind. The ship no sooner embarks then it is caught in a wicked storm which can only be quieted by throwing Jonah overboard. And as if that is not enough, Jonah proceeds to be eaten by a giant sea monster, and as if that too were not enough, he is later barfed back out on shore. Makes Fear Factor look like a walk in the park.

As our story begins, Jonah is gasping for breath on the sea shore after this nightmare roller-coaster ride when he hears God calling him once more to get up and go to Nineveh. His mother not having given birth to any dummies, Jonah obeys this second call.

Now Ninevah was a big city. How big, you ask? It was so big it took 3 days to cross it—of course they did not have cars, but even three days walk makes Ninevah probably larger than Seattle, or San Francisco's city limits—for the ancient world, its a very big city, in fact the largest city in the world in its day. But Jonah sets out, crying out that the end is near—repent or in 40 days the city will be destroyed. Now we have people even today crying out such a message, but no one seems to pay them much mind. We can well imagine though with all that had already happened to him on this trip, that Jonah really leaned into this message with gusto. He is one angry guy. On the other hand he wants his mission to be a bust—to be the last nail in the Assyrian's coffin.

But then another crazy thing happens. They do repent. The arrogant and ruthless Ninevites, masters of the universe, they do hear God's word through one whom most of us would dismiss as a crank and a kook and they do convert.. Everyone from the king on down starts a fast and covers themselves in sack cloth and ashes. Again our edited version does not include this, probably because its funny and the bible shouldn't be funny, but the King even commands that the animals fast in sack cloth and ashes. So imagine not just all the people, but their pets and farm animals, cats and dogs, bunnies and hamsters, horses and cows—all hang their heads in shame, draped in sackcloth with ashes poured on their heads. And so God does what God does, he forgives.

Understandably Jonah is not so forgiving. He is angrier than ever. He goes off by himself and curls up in a ball-- sullen and depressed. God scolds him: "Do you really have a right to be so angry?" Jonah responds "Just shoot me." "Kill me now."

And so God has to teach him another lesson. He begins with a miracle. God has a gourd plant grow up overnight where Jonah is sulking, that provides him with some shade from the noontday Middle-Eastern sun. Then the next day God sends a worm to attack the gourd plant so that it withers up and dies. Jonah spirits had risen with the presence of the plant, now he is back into the beating desert sun. He complains and goes into an even deeper funk--would it have been so hard for God to have protected the plant he had miraculously given him ? God now is ready to whack him upside the head for the last time to teach Jonah his lesson:

He asks Jonah: "Why should I have more love for a silly gourd plant than for a vast city of hundreds of thousands?"

What is to be drawn from this crazy story? It reminds me of an insight that I learned from a German Romantic Catholic philosopher and theologian from the early nineteenth century, Franz von Baader. Baader explains that God can work with us, if we choose to work with him, or God can work through us, despite us, if we resist him. But as Jonah finds, what we cannot do is run away from God, and hope God just forgets all about us. God works either with us or through us, despite us, but God will not work without us. Another image: think of God's will as the current in a river, and yourself as a fish, you can swim with the current or swim against the current, but what you cannot do is jump out of the river altogether.

Baader continues that if we do embrace the current and work with God we will also find God relating to us in yet a third way, we will find God not only working with us but living in us. We find ourselves becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit, a dwelling place of God's compassion, in which all life can take refuge. Like the priest says of Christ in the Great Amen at the end of the Eucharistic prayer, the

Father works through us, with us, and in us.

I want to close by just making a couple observations about our second vocation story. First while Jonah resists God's call the disciples jump at the chance to follow Jesus immediately. Thus while Jonah ends up being thrown into the watery chaos and eaten by a monstrous fish, the disciples draw life from that same chaos, drawing in so many fish, that their nets are at their breaking point. Of course these are smaller, more human-sized, not having been fed by a lifetime of anger and resentment.

The other observation I would make is that unlike Jonah, Jesus does not answer God's call by himself. His first act is to recruit companions with whom to share the work and the rewards of his ministry. That reminds me of another insight I learned from Baader—that in the sin of Adam, man wanted to live without God, but the message of the incarnation is that God does not want to live without man.

God does not want to work without us, does not want to live without us. Rather he calls up us to be his companions, walking beside him, healing his people. That's the original name of the Jesuits as well, the companions of Jesus. The Jesuit calling is also to proclaim the love of God, a love so big that it can embrace our worst enemies, even ourselves.