

## Sermon | Third Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Mark 1:14-20 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | January 20, 2024

---

"Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ." These are words from our opening collect this morning- give us grace to answer your call O God. Our scriptures readings today focus on the theme of call and answering this call.

God calls Jonah. When the first time God calls him, Jonah decides to not answer that call and rather run away from God. When Jonah learns his lesson, God calls him a second time. And this time he answers the call.

Along the Sea of Galilee some fishermen have a life changing encounter when Jesus calls them to follow him. These fishermen answer the call and later become the core of Jesus' team- the twelve disciples.

Calls in scripture are extremely varied in nature. Sometimes the calls are explicit, as in the call of Moses in the burning bush. And sometimes they are ambiguous, like when Esther's cousin and guardian Mordecai seeks her help by saying: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Some calls are made multiple times, like in the case of Jonah. Sometimes what one is called to changes as time progresses- at one point a prophet is called to proclaim judgment and condemnation and at another point in history the same prophet is called to proclaim hope and salvation.

A call can mark the beginning of a journey, but a call can also mark a renewed commitment to continue that journey. For instance, Peter is called

to be a disciple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but after Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter is called again by Jesus with a renewed focus to take care of the people like a shepherd. Jesus tells him feed my lambs, take care of my sheep.

And then God's call comes to all sorts of people- to commoners, like fishermen, and to politically influential prophets like Elijah and Nathan.

When I was interested in becoming a priest in the Episcopal church, I had to start with the first step in a long process for ordination. This first step was the discernment process—a yearlong meeting with a group of fellow parishioners where together we would discern God's call through prayer and conversation. Early on I shared with the group that I couldn't narrate any spectacular moment or event in my life where I heard God's call. For me this interest was where my life journey had led me to. For me it was what I prayerfully desired to do. For me it was taking the next steps in service for the experiences and skills I had acquired. I was blessed with a wonderful group of loving people who affirmed that I should continue the journey of ordination.

I may not have heard any specific call from God for me to serve in the Episcopal church, but one thing I know was I was earnestly and persistently calling God to be with me in this journey. I called God to lead me. I called God to guide me and correct me. This was my way of answering God's call.

If you look at all the people called in the scripture from ancient Israelite times to the period of Jesus, the broad content of God's call is always more or

less the same- it's a call to bring about justice and righteousness, a call to bring healing and hope, and a call for deliverance and wholeness for people. It's call for all that is true and good and beautiful that can lead to human flourishing.

And when we think about call in this larger context, each of us is called. Maybe there isn't one stark moment or event where we hear a specific call of action, but the call to all humanity is reasonably clear.

The specifically Christian version of the call is in the baptismal covenant which we say together at every baptism: we are called to be in spiritual fellowship of prayers, teaching and sacraments; we are called to resist evil and repent when we err; called to proclaim the goodness of God by word and deed; called to seek, serve, and love all people; and finally called to strive for justice and peace and the dignity of all.

The fishermen immediately answered Jesus' call to follow him. It's hard for us to understand what prompted this response. Did they know Jesus? Was it the authority and charisma of Jesus that made an impression on them? Or was it simply an act of faith and courage from them to follow this man Jesus? In any case, they answer the call.

And answering the call is as crucial as the call itself.

And here I must admit that I have lectured many a times on the need to answer calls to my dear teenage daughter when she doesn't pick my calls even when she is by herself and doing nothing but sitting in a train! She instead prefers to cut my call and text back 'what?' I know that with every passing year I am more and more out of touch with how technology is used by younger generations, but I

still prefer talking to a person on a call and getting the communication done than endlessly texting and dealing with mistypes and miscommunication.

But whatever our preferred way of communication, getting back to the point-- answering God's call is crucial. But answering this call may not always be easy. When we pursue truth, goodness and beauty; when we pursue justice and salvation for all; we strive against the human tendency of selfishness, the tendency of domination, of falsehood, and of perversion. We strive against the evil that has a very strong pull on every human heart. Answering the call sometimes means fighting the powers of evil within and around us.

But there is help. And the surprising part is that God is the one who helps us answer God's call. The Spirit of God, the spiritual fellowship of other Christians, the encouragement of those who are also striving to answer the call-- God can use all of these to help us answer God's call.

As we join to answer the call of God, may we like Jonah, like the first disciples, and like all our ancestors in faith strive to partake in God's call for life, flourishing, and salvation for all. Amen.