

***Responding to God's Call –Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 & Mark 1: 14-20***  
**Sermon for 7 November 2021 by Caroline Seaton**

I'd like to talk today about some different examples we heard about in the Bible readings - how people respond to God's call. First of all Jonah, who didn't want to listen to God, and indeed disobeyed him for a while. And secondly the call of the first disciples who willingly responded to Jesus' call, but it will have come at a cost to their family. Let me read us the story of Jonah in our first reading from Rhyming Bible by Bob Hartman. God asked Jonah to do a job for him. 'Go to Nineveh and deliver a message for me'. But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Instead, he ran away in the opposite direction towards Tarshish. He found a boat to help him escape and promptly went to sleep. As he slept a wind blew and the waves crashed, the boat rocked violently, and the sailors were afraid. They started throwing cargo overboard, but it was no use. The storm grew wilder and wilder. Jonah realised God was angry with him and so told the crew to throw him overboard as he knew the storm was his fault. Reluctantly they threw him overboard and the storm stopped! Jonah sank deeper and deeper into the depths – he prayed 'please don't let me drown!' A great big fish swallowed him up where he stayed there for 3 days. But God had sent the fish to save him so Jonah thanked God, and God forgave him. The fish did a big burp and Jonah was thrown up onto dry land. He went to Nineveh and delivered God's message – the people were wicked and didn't listen either. Jonah said "mend your ways in 40 days or Nineveh will be destroyed." When the people heard the message from God, they were shocked. They had forgotten God was watching them. They were sorry that they had been bad and decided to be good from then on. So God forgave them.

Jonah waited for God to destroy the city as was the message from God, but nothing happened. Jonah was very grumpy. God asked Jonah why he was grumpy? God said I forgave you because I love you, I forgave the people of Nineveh for their wicked ways because I love them too.

God had a specific purpose for Jonah – deliver a message.

In our Gospel reading Jesus just puts out a call for Simon and Andrew James and John to follow him. There is no specific task like the message to Jonah – just follow me and I'll have you fishing for men. And they readily agreed to follow him. Not like Jonah!

Now people were often expected to follow in the family business. The well know poet John Betjeman describes in his auto biography, how as the son of a prosperous silverware maker of Dutch descent he was expected to go into the family business. But he didn't want to join the family industry. He wanted to be a poet. His father said that was a stupid pipe dream – "you've got to enter the family business, not only to make money but for the family honour." But as we know now it wasn't a stupid idea, but for his father it must have been a great blow.

Like the father of John Betjeman, I wonder what Zebedee, the father of James and John, thought when they decided to follow Jesus and breaking the family tradition of fishing of more than 4 generations. Can we surmise what Zebedee thought? 'What the heck do they think they are doing? Going off like that – that's the end to our livelihood, our business. How dare they.' Or looking on the bright side perhaps Zebedee had heard of the wonderful new young prophet from Nazareth and was happy that his sons had decided to respond readily to his call and follow him.

And what did Andrew and Simon think ? This life isn't much fun catching fish every day? We want adventure! They must have heard about John the Baptist baptizing people with water in the river Jordan, the baptism of Jesus and the heavens being torn apart with the Spirit descending like a dove. This was exciting stuff so they too followed him.

When God called Jonah to go and warn the violent and godless Ninevites of their impending doom, all his pride in being a Hebrew—and therefore uniquely favoured by the Almighty rose up in rebellion. Pagans, to him, were the worst kind of human garbage, not even fit to pollute the good earth by living on it. They were the “untouchables,” and that God should take an interest in them was unthinkable. Therefore, not being one to put up with that which was not to his mind, he fled to Joppa and got himself a passage on a ship bound for Tarshish.

Thinking about the two different reactions: it was probably easy for God to be pleased with James and John, Andrew and Simon – even if the motives might have been excitement! But what about Jonah? A human father would probably have shrugged Jonah off in disgust and found someone else more willing to take his message to Nineveh, but not so our Heavenly Father. He knew he had a purpose for Jonah, and he persisted, in love, to call him.

If God has a purpose for someone, then, the gifts and calling of God were binding. When Jonah ran away , God made the seas rage and when Jonah jumped overboard, God sent a big sea creature to save him – there was no escape for Jonah!

Now the reason God sent Jonah to Nineveh was possibly this. The Ninevites worshipped the goddess Ashtoreth, but they also deferred to the god Dagon who had a man's upper body and a fish's tail. Jonah possibly being bleached completely white from his head to his toes by the acids present in the belly of the fish, and the sudden appearance of this ghostly figure from the waves the fishermen may have been convinced that this was Dagon's messenger and fallen flat in worship. It's not in the Bible but a possible answer to the response of the people of Nineveh.

And although Jonah complied with God on the outside, he was stubbornly disobeying on the inside. After delivering the message he retired to a flimsy shelter on a hill overlooking the city and waited for the fireworks to start in 40 days . Result? Utterly and absolutely nothing! To his utter disappointment , he finds not just the people from the king down, but their animals as well, clothed in sackcloth and sprinkled with ashes as an indication of their absolute acceptance of the prophetic word sent to them by God, their deep repentance, and their fervent anxiety to get right with the Lord. This does not suit our friend Jonah at all and he flies into a fury at God and lets Him have a piece of his mind. God's answer is to cause a leafy gourd to grow up to help protect Jonah from the blazing sun, for which Jonah is somewhat sullenly grateful, and then to promptly remove it the next day! His reply to Jonah's bitter complaints about this is that if Jonah can have so much compassion on himself for his loss of comfort in spite of being aware of what a faulty child of God he is, then how much more compassion will Almighty God have on a people who are utterly ignorant of right from wrong .

As there was no escape for Jonah, it's the same for us. God is there for each and every one of us and calls us for his purpose. No matter how far we might try and hide, God waits patiently for us.

Like James and John, Simon and Andrew may we all by that grace read, mark, learn, and take on board our calling and hear the word of God.