

“Unlikely Followers”

January 22, 2012

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

Jonah had a problem. He was a devoted, committed, devout prophet of God, so he couldn't ignore God's call. But he was also a patriot. He had no desire to do anything that would help the enemy. And that's why he ran away. The story is set in the 8th century BC, during the years when the country of Assyria was a superpower and a threat to Israel. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria.

So you can see why Jonah would run away. Now I said the story was set in the 8th century, but it was probably written and circulated sometime during the 5th century BC, after Israel's return from exile in Babylon. During those years there was a movement to establish an exclusive relationship between God and Israel. The wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt. Ethnically mixed families were broken up. A new kind of purity was introduced in an effort to better control their society.

The story of Jonah may have emerged as a voice of opposition to those efforts. In other words, this story may be political satire. In the story Jonah is running away from a God who makes no distinction between Israel and other nations. But God won't stop calling him to go to Nineveh. In fact God tracks him down and places him in the belly of a fish to bring him back. That's where we find him in the chapter we just heard, just after the fish has spit him out onto land again.

And this time Jonah doesn't run away, but look how half-heartedly he carries out his call. He goes to a city that's three days journey across and he only goes in a third of the way. Then he says one sentence: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.” He practically whispers it. But on the strength of that little pronouncement, the whole place goes into mourning. And it proves itself to be much more faithful to God than God's own prophet.

This is political satire but in a theocracy like Israel, anything said politically is also saying something theologically. In the face of a religious establishment that wanted to shackle God, to keep God contained to their narrow interests, voices like Jonah's spoke out for a God who sees beyond Israel, whose compassion is available to anyone who calls. They speak for a God who will even forgive their worst enemies.

It seems like societies often need reminding of this. We can get so caught up in our desire to protect ourselves or preserve our traditions or way of life that we lose touch with realities beyond our own. And often we invoke God to sanctify our political or economic systems. Stories like Jonah point to a powerful alternative. Through what seems like a children's story we learn about God's broader and deeper concerns that reach far beyond the systems we want to protect.

All through the story we meet the unexpected. First the prophet runs away, then he's rescued by a fish. Next he speaks to infidels and all at once they become faithful. God refuses to

be predictable and even has a change of mind. God's unexpected nature cannot be pinned down or controlled or thwarted.

During the season of Epiphany, these weeks before the season of Lent, we discover God has all sorts of unlikely followers, whether they be astrologer magi from the East, enemy Assyrians to the north, or a handful of uneducated fishermen in Jesus' own province.

Mark, too, tells a story about an unpredictable God. It would have made much more sense if Jesus had gone to a local synagogue or school to recruit his followers. Some scholars suggest that Peter and Andrew, James and John may have already heard of Jesus somehow, and that's why they were so quick to leave everything behind and follow him. There's no evidence for that in Mark's Gospel though. I'm inclined to think that Jesus may have been calling people to follow him all day, and they were just the first to take him up on it. Regardless of their motives, the point is they did it. Just like the Ninevites in Jonah, these fishermen responded immediately when God came near.

And as we discover as the story unfolds, there may have been times when Jesus regretted calling them because these are not very special men at all. Over and over they miss the point. Over and over others around them display deeper faith. They turn out to be the perfect example of that old saying: "God doesn't call the qualified, but qualifies those who are called." It's almost as if Mark were trying to tell us something about ourselves. Because in the end these same unlikely followers go on to spread the good news to every corner of the world in one way or another. If people like them can do that, then surely there's hope for people like you and me.

We can seem like pretty unlikely followers ourselves can't we. We live in a culture and a time that doesn't really understand the ways of God anymore. I remember once hearing from a missionary who, when he was in college told one of his professors that he was going to Ethiopia for mission work among non-Christian people. The professor knew about his commitments and told him he'd probably feel very comfortable there because spiritual talk was part of the ethos there like it isn't here. It's not easy to respond to God when we're really not even used to listening for God in the first place.

So there's no point in wondering whether you or I would do what Peter and Andrew and James and John did when Jesus called. We wouldn't. How could we? How could any of us just drop everything, our homes, our cars, our families, our jobs, our educations, give up any security and every responsibility we might have to take on a new life? When you think about it, we're really the unlikeliest followers imaginable....which makes us the most likely to be called.

God works in the world in unexpected ways, works in the world even through people like you and me. So when we read these stories about faithful, immediate responses, we have reason to hope. Jesus is calling followers still. He calls us away from our occupation with building families and careers and offers to make us something new. He offers to infuse our lives with new meaning, to teach us to see the world through new eyes. He calls us to see his face in the faces of people who are struggling: people next to us on these pews, people in downtown Buffalo, people in Somalia or Afghanistan or Haiti. He calls us to see even those we regard as enemies in a new way. He calls us to envision a whole new world; one where devotion to God

and neighbor trumps devotion to prosperity and growth. He calls us to see God's kingdom around us, near enough to put out our hand and touch it.

And all we have to do is turn toward him, let go of our fears, and say, "Yes!" And when we do, just as the stories about Jonah and the disciples are really stories about God, so will our lives become stories about God who reaches out to unlikely followers in unexpected ways and makes them new. So learn to listen for Jesus calling; find ways to let go of your nets or whatever makes you feel safe; and step out of the boat and into God's kingdom waiting for us all.

Amen