

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

A Slow Walk

A sermon preached by
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Texts

Mark 1:14-20
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

January 25, 2009

Mark 1: 14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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I had it all planned out. I knew that if I left the house late enough and walked slow enough I would see the school bus cross in front of me at the top of the hill and I could turn around, walk home, and honestly tell my mom that I had missed the bus. It never occurred to me that (1) the trick only worked the first few times before my mom realized that it was intentional and (2) that missing the bus didn't mean I got to stay home from school because, although she hated doing it, mom would drive me.

I did not like school as a child. This man standing before you, who eventually spent 23 years in formal schooling, with 2 graduate degrees and lots of books, hated school so much as a young child that he would do almost anything to avoid going. I would fake stomach aches and fevers, I would try my best to pretend I overslept, work my hardest to convince my mom that I heard our school emergency closing number on the radio after a snowfall. But my best trick – my mom will tell you to this very day – was the slow walk. I could drag out that 5 minute walk over Delaware Avenue and up First Avenue into a half-hour trudge through the worst terrain imaginable. If there was a way to delay long enough to miss that prison bus, I'd do it.

It's that slow walk that Jonah's got going in that piece of his story that we read this morning. God sent Jonah to Nineveh. He didn't want to go, we all know that. Once God told him to go to Nineveh, Jonah ran as fast as possible in the opposite direction to Joppa where he caught a boat headed to Tarshish. The boat encountered God's wrath by way of a wicked storm and the sailors tossed Jonah overboard at his suggestion. Jonah was swallowed by the proverbial big fish and for three days sat in its belly until God let the fish drop him off onto dry land. Again God told him to go to Nineveh and this time, reluctantly and grudgingly, Jonah headed in the right direction.

The story tells us that Nineveh is a great city, “an exceedingly large city” – excavations now let us know that it was only about 3 miles long and 1½ miles wide – an area of 4½ square miles. Jonah is to preach to the inhabitants of this great city that God is not very happy with them and that their city would be destroyed in forty days. He doesn't want to do it. He hasn't wanted to do it since the first time God called him to go. He's avoided it by making up every excuse in the book – “They're not going to listen to me;” “I have a stomachache, God;” “Why don't *you* go, God?;” “I'm too tired and I think I have a fever. Send someone else;” “If I tell them this, you're just gonna change your mind, God. And then who's gonna look foolish? Not you, God, that's for sure. Me, that's who. They're going to blame me.” “I think I need to stay home today. I really do have a stomachache.”

None of those excuses worked for Jonah. Not even the sure and certain stomachache. So he figured he'd adopt my old favorite – the slow walk. Here he is in a city that's only 3 miles long – that's about the distance from here to Ardmore UMC. It took him *a day* to walk to the middle of this city. How slow does one have to walk to take a full day to walk 1½ miles? It's only 1 mile from here to the old Trinity UMC. And once there in the middle of Nineveh, he *whispered* God's message as only a reluctant preacher can *whisper* – “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown ...”

Me and Jonah. The great slow walkers of the world.

Have you ever had something to do that you just don't want to do? I hope you all nodded yes because it's just a fact of life. There are some things that we all have to do that we'd much rather avoid doing – hence the long line of cars at Philadelphia's 30th Street Post Office just before midnight on April 15th. Or making that call to the doctor to find out what that little bump is on the back of your neck. Or starting that diet and exercise program you promised in your New Year's

resolution. Drag your feet. Join Jonah and me on the slow walk around the corner.

It's that same way when it comes to God's call. None of us responds very quickly. It's just part of the human character, I think. Do you know the story of Samuel being called by God while he lay asleep in the Temple? Samuel never figured out that it was God that was calling him. It wasn't until someone else, Eli, told him that it might be God that Samuel even considered that possibility. And then he waited until God called a *fourth* time before he finally responded.

That's how it so often is when God calls. We look the other way, oblivious to where the call has come from. God calls us to do many things in this world – feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, work for peace and justice, love our neighbors and ourselves and our enemies. God calls us to do many things and we try hard to ignore the call. We put on the slow walk and try to miss the bus. We don't listen to God's call. We're not prepared to respond.

One of the commentaries I read to prepare this sermon opened its section on this morning's Gospel lesson from Mark telling us of Jesus' call of the first disciples with this line: "It's hard not to answer a ringing telephone."

One Saturday not long ago, my phone wasn't working all day long. The company said it would be back online by 11:00 pm, Saturday night. It wasn't working by the time I went to bed that night and it was still not back on by Sunday morning. And let me tell you, it was kind of nice not hearing the phone ring all day. It was nice knowing that my Voicemail was still working and that I could call in from elsewhere to check for messages if I wanted. But not having the phone ring is sometimes a good escape.

"It's hard not to answer a ringing telephone." I know I've tried. You let it ring and ring and ring. But eventually you have to answer it.

I went through school determined that I was going to be a lawyer. I made that decision in 8th grade and held onto the dream through high school and on into college. In college I heard God's call to pastoral ministry – maybe even as early as high school I had recognized its existence. In my final year of college, it began to occur to me that I needed a backup plan – what if I didn't get accepted to law school? "I could be a teacher – American history or social studies. Yeah, that could work," I thought to myself, "Or maybe I could be a minister. Church has always been important to me. Nah, there's no money in that."

I was accepted to law school so that's where I headed, as far away from Nineveh – and God's call – as I could get. Three years of law school later, I graduated and passed the bar exam and then practiced law fulltime in Pennsylvania for two years. I ignored the ringing telephone for as long as I possibly could, but it's hard not to answer a ringing telephone. Especially hard once you figure out that it's God calling. So, I answered the phone, "Hello?" And 20 years later here I am.

Part of our problem with responding is that we make some mistaken assumptions about the call of God.

We assume, first, that God isn't going to speak to us in the commonness of our lives. God has more important things to do rather than calling me out of my everyday life. God doesn't just speak in our presence like in the experiences we read of in our Bible. I'm not like Samuel or Jonah or any of Jesus' disciples from way back then. But they made that same mistake. So often in Hebrew scripture we find the phrase, "visions were rare." Even in the Samuel story we hear it – "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Samuel made that same mistake, assuming that

God wouldn't be speaking to him. God's not around so much these days, we assume. God's not going to speak to me.

Some have argued that God is dead, or that God has never existed, or that God just doesn't care so much about the world anymore. And even if God is still around, God simply doesn't speak out loud anymore.

But that's not true. God continues to call each of us today just as surely as God called the ancients to do the many things that we've read about in our Bible. God calls us just as sure as God has called people like Samuel or Jonah or Moses or Mary or Jesus or Paul. God speaks into our lives and calls us into service. Whether we listen and respond or not is another question – but God calls.

Frederick Buechner, contemporary writer and theologian, in *The Sacred Journey*, one piece of his autobiographical reflections, reminds us just how it is that God speaks today:

[I]f God speaks to us at all in this world, if God speaks anywhere, it is into our personal lives that he [or she] speaks. Someone we love dies, say. Some unforeseen act of kindness or cruelty touches the heart or makes the blood run cold. We fail a friend, or a friend fails us, and we are appalled at the capacity we all of us have for estranging the very people in our lives we need the most. Or maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all – just one day following another, helter-skelter, in the manner of days. We sleep. We dream. We remember and forget. We have fun and are depressed. And into the thick of it, or out of the thick of it, at moments of even the most humdrum of our days, God speaks.

God speaks. God calls you and me into service. Some are called to ordained ministry – that call which I avoided until I could no longer ignore it. Others are called to missionary tasks, some to music in praise of God, some to teach children, others are called to nurse the sick back to health, others to help in the administration of life's mundane and routine affairs.

We are each called to serve God in some way. We need to listen *for* that call – we need to listen *to* that call – we need to figure out how to *respond* to that call. I can't tell you what that call sounds like in your life. You need to find it and respond to it. We all need to realize that God does speak to us – “at moments of even the most humdrum of our days” – figure out what that call sounds like, and respond.

A second assumption we make is that we are to keep the call to ourselves. God has called *me* – it has nothing to do with *you*. We assume that it is a personal revelation.

Mark's Gospel relates the calling of the first disciples sort of matter-of-factly. Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me,” and they drop everything and follow. He found John and James, called them, and they left their father and followed. But John's Gospel treats the story a little differently. There, Andrew is the first called and the prime mover in responding to Jesus.

Andrew would not keep it quiet. He knew that God's call can't be ignored and it can't be hidden. Andrew, responding to God's call, went to get his brother Simon and convinced him that he needed to follow as well. Andrew refused to keep God's presence in his life quiet.

God's call is to be made public. The entire community is to hear about our individual call. I've been called to ordained ministry and if I don't preach and teach and offer the sacraments, no one will ever know that I've been called to this service. If I choose to keep it to myself it does no good. We

are each called by God to serve God in one way or another. We choose to keep it quiet or let it spread to others.

Tom Fox is a 54 year old Quaker from Virginia who has lived “a tranquil life for most of his years.” He’s a great listener and a negotiator says his friends. After college, Tom enlisted in the Marines to fulfill his military service during the Vietnam war – he served by playing clarinet in the Marine Band.

He was working at the Whole Foods Market when he encountered a dramatic life change. The 9/11 attacks and the US government response led Tom Fox to reevaluate his life and several years ago he quit his job at Whole Foods. Tom joined an organization called Christian Peacemaker Teams and with them went to Iraq. He didn’t go to Iraq looking for trouble; he went looking to make a difference in contributing toward a peaceful solution.

While in Iraq, he and 3 others were captured by insurgents and were never heard from until March 2006 when his body was found. In an NPR story about Tom Fox, his friend, Marge Epstein, explained that Tom had reached a point where his two children were grown and he wanted to become a fulltime peace activist. September 19 “caused him to think about the number of days, hours, minutes that he had left on this earth,” recalled Epstein, “and what he wanted to do with them and more to the point what he was *called* to do with them. So he went about this in a very deliberate and orderly fashion.”

What he was called to do with the days, hours, minutes left on his life after what many might consider a full life already. But Tom Fox had to change direction, had to answer the call that God had placed on his life. There was risk involved – as is the case with anyway God calls us – and Tom no doubt knew that. But he had to respond – and it had to be public, not just between he and God, but in a way that made a difference for others in the world.

We also assume God’s call is going to be dramatic and earth-shaking, that God will single out those individuals that are chosen to be servants and that they are better equipped than the rest of us. Jonah’s call was pretty spectacular – boat and storm and belly of a fish and all – but its more often a whisper or a tug that God uses to call us. It’s the average person that receives God’s call – each of us who receives God’s call.

Look at Samuel – a young man minding his own business, asleep when God called. There was no fanfare or lightning bolt or clap of thunder. Look at Andrew or Simon or John or James – fisherman from Galilee, low on the social ladder, barely making ends meet. The call to them was not spectacular. Jesus simply walks up to them and says, “Follow me.”

I know a pastor who tells the story of his driving home one night and losing control of his car. He headed toward the edge of a cliff but suddenly hit a tree and stopped before tumbling over the edge. The next day, he took his father out to the spot to show him what had happened and to show him the tree. There was no tree. The next day he began the paperwork to enroll in seminary.

Sometimes we need that 2” x 4” board to smack us in the head to get us to listen to the call and to figure out how to respond. Paul needed that nudge – the blinding light and the shove. Jonah needed some time in the belly. But usually the call happens in our daily routine. We need to look around, listen around, receive God’s call graciously and patiently.

God’s call can come in surprising ways. Maybe through the cry of a baby that needs to be held. Maybe through the voice of a street person who asks, “Can you spare some change?” Is God’s call to you the voice of a coworker asking for a minute of your time at the lunch table to listen to some trouble in his or her life? Maybe God’s call is in the sound of a crowd gathering to pray for peace instead of war. God may be calling

you to service through financial support and your personal presence to the church.

Only God and you can know how God calls you.

There are so many different ways that God calls. You can probably think of several as you sit here this morning. God's call is there whether we want it or not. God's call is there whether we choose to hear it or not.

We spend a lot of time avoiding God's call. We chose the slow walk to the bus stop rather than the chance that God's call might require something substantive from us. What we truly need to avoid is making mistaken assumptions about the call of God. Don't assume God isn't speaking anymore – God speaks as strongly and as clearly as ever. Don't assume that God isn't speaking to you specifically – God is speaking to each of us. Don't assume that God's call is to be kept secret – spread the news of God's call so that everyone knows what's happening.

God calls to you at this very moment. God calls into the everyday-ness of our lives. Listen, receive, respond to God's call. Avoid the slow walk, not the call.

Amen.