

Answering the Call

The Collect of the Day is meant to gather, to collect the prayers of the people as we come together for worship. This is what we prayed in our Collect of the Day this morning:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works.

Please notice, we do not pray that only the clergy answer the call to proclaim the Good News. We do pray only for those discerning a call to ordination. We prayed – you prayed: Give us – all of us – the grace to answer readily the call of our Savior. In answering this call, God invites us to become messengers of the Good News, which is God’s grace and love given to all. In answering the call, we become the instruments of God, to bring the knowledge and glory of God to the whole world. We are invited to become partners with God in the holy work of work of creating and redeeming and loving the world.

Last week, we heard the story of Samuel, who would become a great prophet of Israel. When Samuel was a young boy serving in the temple, under the priest, Eli. At night, he heard a voice speak to him, calling him by name. Each time this happened, Samuel supposed Eli was calling and he responded, “Here I am.” After several times, Eli discerned that it may be the Lord who was calling to Samuel, so he told him that if it were to happen again, Samuel is to reply, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” The voice called again, and Samuel gave this exemplary response, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Here I am.”

Today we have the story of another prophet, Jonah, but was not ready or willing to answer like young Samuel. The book of Jonah begins this way, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah, ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’” Instead, Jonah ran away from the Lord; he went down to Joppa, a city on the coast, and paid fare to get on board a ship bound for Tarshish. It’s helpful to know that Nineveh was hundreds of miles inland, and Jonah hopped on a ship headed in the other direction. It would be like you or me being called by God to go preach to some city in Nebraska, but instead we head hop in our car and drive to California.

Jonah did not want to be a preacher, at least not to the people of the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Without going into all the historical and political explanations of the relationships between Israel and Nineveh, it is enough to know that by the time of Jonah, the two nations had been bitter enemies for many years. And the Ninevites were known to be terribly wicked; even God admitted as much. So, Jonah took off in the other direction.

As it turns out, Jonah cannot run from the Lord. God is still God, not only in Israel, but even out upon the seas, and the Lord sends a terrible storm that threatens the lives of everyone onboard the ship. Jonah confesses to his shipmates that he is the one who has brought this disaster upon them, because he is running from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth and sea. The sailors try to row back to shore, but the storm gets even worse. Finally, with Jonah's insistence, the sailors throw him overboard. Soon the storm goes away. There is an interesting aside: as the sailors are doing all this, begin to pray to Jonah's God. And as soon as Jonah is tossed out, the storm stops, and the sailors, who were not Jews, worship and make sacrifices to the God of Israel. Ironically, without even trying, almost in spite of himself, Jonah had made his first converts. It seems that God can work with anything. Or anyone. It seemed certain that Jonah would soon die, being thrown into the raging sea. But the Lord sent a whale or a great fish to swallow Jonah, and there he spent three days and nights. Three dark, cold, death-like days and nights in the belly of the beast. While in that miserable place, Jonah cried to the Lord in prayer. "Spare me, and I will obey," he prayed. And the Lord commands the fish to spit out Jonah onto dry land.

Here is where today's reading picks up. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time (God loves to give us second chances), and God says, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." This time, Jonah makes the long journey to Nineveh, and when he is there, he does indeed preach. It is one the shortest sermons in the Bible, and maybe one of the worst sermons I the Bible. In Hebrew, it is only five words; in English it is eight. "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's it. Can you imagine a sermon like that? No opening little joke. No story to illustrate an idea, no analogy from daily life. Just these harsh, pointed words. Forty days more, and it's all over.

But even that is enough for God to work with, and the response to Jonah's sermon is astonishing. It may be the greatest response to a sermon in the entire Bible. All the

people in this huge, wicked city of Nineveh repent. They believe God. The king makes a decree that there shall be a fast: all humans, from the greatest to the least, are to fast and put on sackcloth as a sign of repentance. The king makes a command that that even the cattle and all animals must fast and put on sackcloth. I am a priest and a dog-owner, and I have never made my dog fast and wear sackcloth to seek forgiveness from the Lord. But in Nineveh, the dogs, cats, cows, kings, women, children, everybody repents. And the Lord sees what they have done and accepts their repentance, forgives them, and loves them.

As it turns out, however, Jonah is still upset. And he explains why. "You know God," he says, "I knew this would happen. I just knew it. You are a God who is merciful and loving, and forgiving. Down deep, I knew that if I preached repentance, they just might listen, and change, and then you would go right ahead and forgive them." If God spares even the sinners and the enemies, when they really deserved destruction, if God saves people like that, then why am I working so hard to be righteous? What good is it being among the chosen people? This was a hard lesson for Jonah.

After the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians often used the symbol of Jonah in their art, on their places of burial. It was a picture of a large fish or whale, and a person, Jonah, emerging from its mouth. We all know that Jesus, like Jonah, came through the ordeal of three days in the depths – this time in the tomb, the depths of the earth. But the early church also recognized that Jesus, like Jonah came preaching to the sinners, to people, like the Gentiles, who had been strangers to God. And through his preaching, people repented and turned to the Lord. And God accepted them, and worked a change in them, and they were now called as God's own.

As we read the story of Jonah, we discover that we sometimes like the sinner, the people of Nineveh, who need to repent. But there are also times when we are like the stubborn, ornery prophet. We in the church are often so resistant to change. Prior to going to Nineveh, Jonah knew how things were, and there was a certain comfort in that. We are here, and the enemies are there. We know how God feels about us, and how feels about everyone else. We are basically good, we are in, and there is no need to change. Right? Those others are basically wrong, they are out, and frankly, I have no desire for that to change, either. Jonah didn't want change. Down deep, he didn't want to believe in this idea of repentance, because, if taken far

enough, that would change everything and everybody. Even old Jonah would be asked to change.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call. Every Bible story, every one, that involves a call from God means there will be change. Answering a call from God will always mean change. It was that way for Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, go down the list. The call from God changed things for Jonah, and the sailors, and the whole city of Nineveh. Answering the call certainly meant change for that little group of fishermen whom Jesus called to be disciples. Their life would never be the same. The scriptures are clear on this: responding to a call from God will invite us to turn, and repent, and move, and go out into the world, and be changed, and go places you never would have planned on for yourself. Maybe I should have warned you before I asked you to pray the collect of the day, because when we answer that call, God only knows what we may be in for.

It is Good News that God can work a change. It is one of the things God does best. The apostle Paul wrote plainly, “the present form of this world is passing away.” He wrote that almost 2000 years ago and it is still true. The present age is always passing away because God is always making all things new. And God can work with anything and anybody – a willing child named Samuel, a stubborn old guy named Jonah, a bunch of fishermen, you, me. Our God is willing to stir up the seas, and shake up places like Nineveh, and Salt Lake City, and God willing, All Saints Church, God wants to stir up your life and mine if we answer the call.

Give us grace, O God, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of your marvelous works. Amen.

Trace Browning

Year B – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 • Psalm 62:5-12 • 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 • Mark 1:14-20

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

21 January 2024