

“Reluctant and Willing Disciples” Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20 Psalm 62:5-12 1-22-2012

This time of year, the lectionary always uses a variety of ‘call’ stories as references. This is because the lectionary, which is comprised of set readings for each day, tries to follow the timeline of Jesus’ life. So, for two or three weeks we examine the way people were called into the service of God. Very often we see how God calls unlikely people to go about God’s work. This helps us realize that God has a call and claim on each of us and that we all are to find ways to further God’s kingdom right here, in this place.

I have always loved the story of Jonah and his adventures. Especially the part about Jonah trying to flee the presence of God and winding up in the belly of a large fish—not a whale, a large fish. I always thought that Jonah was foolish to try and flee the presence and will of God, for God is a persistent Being who is everywhere God’s creation is and while you can run, you really cannot hide.

Anyway, Jonah finally gave in to God and agreed to go to Ninevah and warn them that God was about to destroy that great and vast city. The people actually heard him and reformed their ways and were spared destruction. This did not please Jonah because he felt they were not worthy of God’s grace. This just goes to show all of us that God’s ways are higher than ours and that we do not understand the mind and heart of our Maker. We are not the ones who are to judge others—that is God’s job. If we were able to grasp this, our world would certainly be a kinder, gentler place.

Jonah was and is known as the “reluctant prophet.” All those called to be prophets had reasons why they were not the best choice. Some told God they could not speak well, others that they were too young. The variety of excuses knew no bounds. But, Jonah was the only one who decided to pack up and run as fast and far as he could to avoid the call and claim God had on his life.

On the other hand, when Jesus called his followers, most of them, at least those we know about, seem to have dropped their lives and packed up to follow him in a heartbeat. They didn’t even give a thought to running away. Perhaps, this is because they could see and touch the person calling them. They sensed he was real and that his mission was something they, as humans, could handle with his guidance. Or, maybe,

they felt it easier to follow because he called many of them in pairs, friends and brothers responded together. Last week Philip and Nathanael who were friends, this week two sets of brothers, Simon and Andrew and James and John. It always is easier to join a group when you are not alone. There is support and strength in numbers.

While many of us do not run, like Jonah did when he sensed God wanted to recruit him, we do resist listening carefully to discover just what it is God wants from us. It can be scary to do God's work. It can demand much of us and we really would prefer to have some time to ourselves when we are not dwelling on the way God wants us to live and move and have our being. So, we let God in a little bit until we need God a lot.

When we need to have God with us, we turn to prayer and reflection for a period of time and then let God go when we have managed to get through tough times. We make promises to God, we kind of barter for God's presence forgetting that God is with us at all times, no matter what kind of predicament we might find ourselves in. I really cannot quite understand how people get through tragic events without having a concept of a higher being they can lean on. I always like to be able to put a problem in God's hands and have faith that I will make it through a difficult day and will be able to sleep at night.

Sometimes we are reluctant to answer God's call on us because we are afraid we will have to become prophets like Jonah or Isaiah or John the Baptist and we will have to wear our religion on our sleeves and walk around proclaiming the good news of God in Jesus. Jonah's life and those lives of the disciples became very public, they were scrutinized by those around them and held to a higher standard. This can be very difficult to handle.

We need to understand that the love of God can be shown through us simply by the way we live our lives and through the way we regard and treat other people. We do not have to trumpet our faith. If we are kind and patient and understanding, if we consider that everyone has a right to live their own lives and that God loves them no matter who they are or where they are in life, we reveal God's love to them. It is a catching proposition. When someone senses the love and non-judgmental attitude someone has toward them, they just might turn around and act in the same way to others they encounter. That old ripple effect comes into play and

the kind and generous actions of one person can spread far beyond their hopes and dreams.

This is what Jesus tried to tell us. This is why he enlisted people to follow him and help him spread the word of the love of God. He knew that if he had a few good men and women around him who understood what they had been called to do, that even if they were reluctant they would see the light of his new way of practicing religion. While those around him were slow to catch on, they did and we are here today. Our job is to pass on all we have learned about leading decent lives and becoming the very best humans we can become.

There is an old camp song that sings about this in simple language:

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,

And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing,

That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it.

You spread his love to everyone, you want to pass it on.

I wish for you my friend the happiness that I've found.

You can depend on him, it matters not where you're bound.

I'll shout it from the mountaintop, I want my world to know:

The Lord of love has come to me I want to pass it on.

Amen