

Sunday, January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:6-14

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

The Miracle of Following

Prayer: Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today, now and always. Amen.

We don't normally refer to the gospel lesson that we just heard as a miracle story, but if you really think about it, it's just that...a miracle. The Gospel of Mark, the first and shortest of all four gospels, is filled with a sense of urgency, and the word immediately is used 26 times throughout the entire gospel.

Although this gospel is indeed the shortest, it also communicates a great deal more than expected through literary devices: For example, by Mark forgoing the birth narrative, he places more emphasis on when Jesus' ministry actually began. The number three is used even when it is not evident: Jesus foreshadows his death and resurrection three times, there are three reactions to Jesus' baptism, and the twelve disciples are called over three stories. The number three plays a pretty important role in this gospel and within our own tradition.

Another way in which Mark is clever with how he communicates is that he almost always uses the word "immediately" when Jesus performs a miracle. In this particular gospel reading that we heard this morning of Jesus calling the first four of his twelve disciples, the word "immediately" is used twice.

When we hear the story of how these two sets of brothers (these four fishermen) left everything they have ever known to follow Jesus, we tend to give them all of the credit. We tend to praise them for their bravery and then we begin to fret and wonder if we would have what it takes to do the same.

I definitely don't want to undermine the courage it took for these men to leave everything, but I also believe that it is important for us to not forget about God's role in this miraculous moment. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "This is not a story about us. This is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow —able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food...it is a miracle."¹

It is a miracle that these four men, who most likely had never laid eyes on Jesus before this moment, left their vocations to follow Jesus. Back during this time period, being a fisherman was

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home By Another Way*, 40.

a family business. These four men were following suit of countless generations of men in their families by becoming fishermen. And in an instant, all of that had changed.

Jesus said to them, “Follow Me,” and immediately, they left everything and followed him.

Just like Jesus told the leper to “Be made clean,” he was made clean immediately. And like when he told the blind man, “go, your faith has made you well,” he was able to see immediately. And now, Jesus tells these fishermen to “Follow Me,” and they leave everything and follow him immediately...it’s a miracle.

Another book of the Bible that is filled with a sense of urgency and a miracle story is the book of Jonah. During our Old Testament reading we heard about God’s second call to Jonah to go to Nineveh. As many of you know, the first time God called out to Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction, found a ship to carry him to Tarshish, and ended up in the belly of a large fish for three days and three nights. During that time Jonah prays to God, and his prayers go back and forth between pleading with God and blaming God. (pause) That sounds pretty familiar, doesn’t it?

As we know from the reading we just heard, God does indeed release Jonah from the belly of the large fish and gives Jonah a second chance to fulfill God’s call to him. And Jonah does just that.

Reading and contemplating these two stories of urgency and miracles has caused me to contemplate the times in my own life when I have no other explanation other than to say that God moved me, and I’m forever changed...it’s a miracle.

Several summers ago, I went to St. Augustine, FL, and on the sea shore of St. Augustine is where God pushed me in a way that I would have never anticipated.

I was on the beach talking with a dear friend and mentor of mine. I looked out at the water, and there were dolphins unbelievably close to the shore. My friend and I, without even skipping a beat, immediately took off running, jumped into the water, and swam as fast and as hard as we could.

As much as I love the ocean, it also terrifies me. The ocean is another world that is full of creatures that we have never even seen or heard of before, so there is good reason to have some fear of the vastness of the ocean.

But on this day in St. Augustine, something was tugging at my soul, urging me onward towards those dolphins. In retrospect it probably wasn’t the safest thing to do (I recognize that), but it was one of those moments that I’ll never fully be able to explain. I don’t know how long we treaded water, it felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes. To be so close to something so blissful and feeling God’s presence so fully was one of the most amazing feelings that I have ever felt.

After getting back to the shore, the moment was gone, and we were trying to remember what we had been talking about, but that was gone too.

On the drive back to my friend's home, I remembered what we had been talking about. She was encouraging me to discern a call to the priesthood, and I flat out told her no. God was trying to talk to me through her that day, but when I wasn't making space for God, God did something to get my attention. That trip to visit my friend and mentor several summers ago was the start of my discernment process.

My friend was not the only person who has ever encouraged me to discern this call, but she was the last person who I had told "no," and I've later come to realize that I had another fear of leaving my hometown. The idea of going to seminary meant leaving my hometown, possibly for good.

The only explanation that I can muster together is that God wanted to show me that He would be with me, even through my irrational fears. God put me in a place that would allow me to follow...it's a miracle.

For Simon, Andrew, James, and John, following meant leaving everything behind, and God created that ability for following to take place. For Jonah, following meant needing to learn a hard lesson first, before mustering up the courage to act. The Bible contains many call stories and each of them are unique. Just like the folks in the Bible we are all different people with unique callings ourselves. Taylor also says that "sometimes following may mean staying at home. It may mean letting the hired servants go and taking care of Zebedee when he gets too old to fish...It may mean doing less every day, not more, so that there is time to watch how the light changes on the water, and how the happy fish leap out of it at dusk, happy to have outsmarted you one more time."²

So what does this mean for us in our own lives and within our own callings? In a few moments we will all join together in the second half of our service where we will follow one another to God's table to partake in Holy Eucharist together. And then after the service we will all part ways and live our daily lives until we meet again. We will return to our own callings and vocations. We are all called to do something important whether that be a teacher, a salesperson, an administrative assistant...but what's important is that we ask ourselves how we are making space for God's ability to work in our lives?

God's power and ability is infinitely more than we can ever understand or imagine. How are we following God?

AMEN.

² Ibid, 41.

Bibliography

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home By Another Way*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999.