

Hearing and Heeding God's Call

Sermon 1 22 12

TEXTS: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29-31 and Mark 1:14-20

THEME: Hearing and heeding God's call is the first priority of our lives; it can lead us places we don't want to go and lead to incredible results; God will enable us to do what God calls us to do

PURPOSE: To encourage the listener to hear and heed God's call to him/her

SUBJECT: Christian vocation

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we are in church today because you have called us, invited us, and summoned us here. We are here, not because we searched for you, but rather because you searched for us, found us, claimed us, and gave us jobs to do in your kingdom.

Sometimes we are amazed by your faith in us. There are times, too, when we think that we do not have the gifts or the abilities to do what you expect of us.

Yet you have called us. Help us to have as much faith in ourselves as you have in us. Give us what we need to do your work. This we ask, for the sake of the gospel. Amen.

I feel for the prophet Jonah! God gave him a job that was distasteful to him, and, if you recall the earlier chapters of this story, you will remember that Jonah originally headed in the opposite direction from where God told him to go and prophesy!

Why was the job God gave Jonah distasteful? God told him to go to Nineveh, basically the capital city of an enemy nation and preach. How could he even expect a warm welcome, much less lower himself to preach to an enemy nation!?

The job may have been distasteful to Jonah just because God cared for that enemy city; even more distasteful to think of the possibility that the city might repent and be spared!

So, you remember what happened when Jonah headed away from Nineveh after God first spoke to him. He ended up in the belly of a great fish—or a whale! Jonah finally ended up on dry land, and God's call comes to him a second time! This God can be persistent with us, when God has a job for us to do!

Jonah knew better than to head the opposite way again. Who knows what might have happened if he did? So, Jonah headed to Nineveh and walked one day's length into the city.

Do you think Jonah really preached what God told Jonah to say? I'm skeptical about it. I don't really think God told Jonah to tell Nineveh, "Forty more days, and you'll be destroyed." I think that was Jonah's interpretation of what God told him to say, with a focus on the end he wanted for Nineveh to have! After all, don't we want vengeance on our enemies? Don't we want them destroyed? And we certainly don't want God to care one whit about our enemies, do we?

Jonah had a one day preaching mission, and then the city heard and responded in force! The whole city of 120,000 joined together in acts of repentance, hoping that they could avert their destruction. I even find it a marvel that the people of Nineveh received Jonah's message as God's word. Jonah sure didn't let them know it was! Thus ended one of the world's greatest revivals, with the city turned from its wicked ways and the destruction averted.

Jonah served as an instrument of God's word in spite of himself, even!

One of the main points of this story is the contrast it makes between the response of Nineveh and the response of the Israelite people to their own God! The nation as a whole lived under God's call, as God's chosen people, to serve as a light to the nations of the world. Yet they were falling for idolatry and were thinking themselves as the sole recipients of God's favor. God's call isn't exclusive; it's inclusive. God cares for everyone!

God's call came to Jonah, a reluctant recipient of the call. He responded well enough to produce one of the world's greatest revivals.

We see a different kind of response in Jesus' call of his first disciples, as Mark reports it. Here we are in the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He is just beginning his preaching and teaching. His first decision is not to go it alone. He immediately begins calling on people to help him. In many ways, it seems like he made unlikely choices in calling Peter, Andrew, James and John as his first disciples.

Why would he choose fishermen? It seems like he'd choose someone with a better upbringing in faith, and possibly more literate. Different interpreters say different things about these fishermen. Some say that they were uneducated and low-life types. Others say they were upstanding members and businesspersons of their community. I now tend to think the second interpretation is true, and that these first four disciples had a certain education and standing in the community.

One of the reasons Jesus may have chosen fishermen as his first four disciples comes in the call he gave them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people!" Maybe there are some connections between what you do to catch fish and what you need to do to catch

people! Fishers need to know where the fish are; they need to be optimistic and hopeful; they need to be hard workers and unwilling to give up; they need to know what bait the fish like and are likely to go for.

“Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fish for people.” When Jesus calls us to a task, he makes sure we can do the task. I think that’s something we need to keep in mind when we hear the call. If we feel inadequate, we can have hope. The work we are called to do is done not on our own knowledge and abilities but by the mercy and grace of God, who helps us do the work.

Are you surprised by how quickly the disciples responded? Immediately they left their boats and dropped their nets and followed Jesus! I can get real hung up, here. I’d have a few questions to ask Jesus before I went with him. Where are we going? How long will we be there? What are the pay and benefits? Is there any danger in what we’re going to do? What about my family?

No questions were asked. Peter, Andrew, James and John got up from what they were doing and followed Jesus. One can do a lot of speculating about how this happened. Was it Jesus’ divine power working in them that made them follow him so immediately? I think the Holy Spirit was at work in the Ninevites to make them so quick to hear Jonah’s message and repent! So, the Holy Spirit must have been working on those fishermen. Had Jesus already met and spoken with them before? I don’t think so, as Mark tells the story, but it is possible. Were they all fed up with their work and ready for something new? Who knows for sure? We can focus on Mark’s main point, however. The response of these four disciples is a model for all of his disciples. Hear and heed the word of Jesus. Do what he calls and tells us to do. Answering his call can mean leaving jobs and families; there is a cost. But it is worth it! Fortunately, we do read in the gospel accounts of ongoing family relationships with both sets of brothers, so things must have worked out in their cases!

Hearing and heeding the call of Jesus means joining in his mission of proclaiming the good news of the nearness of God’s kingdom, and calling people to turn their lives back to God. It means joining in the most exciting, life-giving work we can do: serving as instruments of God’s grace, healing, and saving power in Jesus Christ. It means being a part of a movement to help establish righteousness, justice, and peace among families, in communities, and around the world. It can also mean entering into the depths of the battle against evil and injustice.

Our brief passage from I Corinthians this morning also gives us some insight into how we are to hear and heed God’s call. Paul reminds us that we live daily with the possibility that Christ will return. He reminds us that the world as we know it is passing away. So he encourages us to live and work in the world, but not to make worldly things the supreme focus of our lives. Don’t become too attached, even to spouses, money, and our relationships with other people and other things. They aren’t the primary focus of our lives. God’s work and God’s will in Jesus Christ are to remain the primary focus of our lives. Then the changes in the world will not be so threatening or upsetting to us. God

and Jesus are with us through the changes, leading us into the fullness of the kingdom, and using us to help bring it about!

William Willimon, currently a Bishop of the United Methodist Church, leading one of our conferences in Alabama, tells of an experience he had when he was campus minister at Duke University. He says,

One night some years ago, a Duke fraternity invited me to give a talk. The Dean requires them to have a certain number of programs each year in order to give fraternities some semblance of respectability. My assigned topic was "Character and College." I thought, "Lord, thou hast delivered them into my hands." I can't believe that they are dumb enough to invite an old guy like me to talk to young guys like them on "character."

So I went to their fraternity section and knocked on their door. The door opened and I was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten, I imagined. "What is a kid doing over here at this time of the night?" I wondered. Surely we have rules against young children in the dorm this late.

"They're waiting for you in the common room," the boy said. "Follow me, I'll take you there."

We wound our way back into the common room and the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for my presentation. As I began my remarks, I noted that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers. Shortly, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

Well, I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk, I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, I thanked them for the honor, and made my way out. I heard the college kid say to the boy, "You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story."

When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out.

"Let me ask you," I said, "Who was the kid there tonight?"

"Oh, that's Darrell," he said. "The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom's on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff."

"That's amazing," I said. "I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible."

“I tell you what’s amazing,” he said as he took another drag on his cigarette, “what’s amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.”

Hearing and heeding the call of Jesus:

It’s amazing to find that he wants you and me!

It can lead us to places we might not want to go, to serve people we might not want to serve.

It takes priority over anything else in our lives.

It’s an awesome thing to discover that with God’s help, by the grace of God, good things can happen to us and to those to whom we are sent--or those whom God sends to us!