

“Oh, The Places You’ll Go”

by Rev. Susan Morrison

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

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Jonah 3:1-10

³The word of God 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.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of God. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change God’s mind and may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God’s mind was changed about the calamity that God had said would be brought upon them; and God did not do it.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

²⁹I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

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

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God summons. God even calls out our name. It is up to us to decide if we will respond. This is the common thread in this morning's lectionary passages. All of the lessons present the summons of God to participate in the work of God in the world. There is Jonah who is most unhappy with the call that he gets. Despite himself, he responds. In Corinth the call of God comes for a short, intense, highly focused waiting for the fulfillment of the reign of God, which is about to arrive at any moment. And in Mark, the disciples make a complete radical change in life at the mere invitation to follow Jesus. Each of these texts spins around the call of God to the human heart and the challenge to respond to that call.

Let's begin with Jonah. Do you recall the story of Jonah? I've always read that book in the bible not as a history book, but as a parable, a wonderful story. It's never been an issue for me whether or not the story of Jonah is true. Yet, if we keep finding new dinosaurs and four winged birds, who is to say that we will not find one day a huge water creature in whom Jonah could have lived! What I love about the book of Jonah is that there is so much human truth in this story. Jonah may have been waiting in silence for the call of God but once it came, Jonah immediately knew he was not happy with it. God wanted him to go to Nineveh and preach a message of doom.

Nineveh! this was not just any city. In an article about the book of Jonah, Patrick Wilson points out that this was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. It was the seat of the enemy of the Israelites. And because Nineveh stood for everything foreign and evil so Nineveh was thought to be everything that stood against the people of God. Thus, the simple equation: our enemies must be God's enemies. And so the Israelites thought that the capital city of the enemy was not filled with men and women, children and cattle; rather it was filled with enemies who plot against against them. And luckily they had God on their side, in fact, so much so that God even decided destroy Nineveh, the enemy.

But there's just one catch. God chooses Jonah as God's messenger. "You, Jonah! Go to Nineveh. Tell them they are to be destroyed." God commands. Jonah objects. He doesn't want to speak with "the enemy." Jonah wants vengeance, not preaching. And so he tries to escape his call. Now when a prophet won't obey God, a storm and a great fish will.

So, after the storm at sea and that well-known fish episode, Jonah trudges into the great city of Nineveh. He stands in the streets and shouts, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh listen. They believe Jonah. They call for a fast and put on sackcloth. Even the king believes and issues a royal proclamation for repentance. Nineveh changes. And not only do the people of Nineveh change their ways, God changes plans. God decides not to destroy the city of Nineveh. God ends up loving the enemy!

Now, like Jonah, we often don't want the job to which God calls us. It is inconvenient. It causes us to rethink our world views. It might even mean sacrifice. You are not unusual if you find yourself hesitant before the call of God. I bet Rosa Parks felt that way, too, before she had the courage to refuse to move to the back of the bus. Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela may all have shared the same hesitation before they found the courage to refuse to stand against oppression. But like Jonah, their ultimate response transformed a part of God's world.

Last Monday night, eight of us from Holy Trinity, spent the evening at the Danvers Diversity banquet honoring local citizens who have responded to God's call in their lives. Father Gerry Dorgan from St. Mary's and Rev. Chuck Gross, recently retired from Maple Street Church, were honored for their ceaseless work against discrimination. Wayne Burton, President of North Shore Community College and Joseph and Barbara Younger were also honored for responding to the call to work for justice. But most impressive was the award given to Andrew Tarsy, who truly risked everything in August of 2007 when he took an unpopular stand with the national Anti Defamation League. At the time he was ADL's New England Regional Director. The issue was over the massacre of as many as 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1923. The Turkish government as well as the ADL refused to accept genocide as a label for this bloodbath. Tarsy put his own moral principles above position and risked everything by calling for the ADL to acknowledge the Armenian massacre as a genocide. As a result of his stand, the national Anti-Defamation League fired him as its New England regional director. Days later the ADL reversed its position and acknowledged the genocide. Tarsy was rehired and then, in December, resigned his position. "Beware of those causes that choose you" he cautioned us as he received the Justice Award on Monday night, "and always put your principles above position." Tarsy is indeed one of God's heroic justice makers. His response helped to transform the world.

Sometimes God's summons calls for an immediate response. That's what Paul asks of the Corinthians. The call to faithfulness is intense because Paul believes that Jesus' return is imminent and everyone needs to be prepared. What if we all lived that way? Expecting and in fact acknowledging that the Spirit of Christ returns again and again into our lives and we need always to be ready to respond.

I heard that urgency in Barak Obama's inauguration address, didn't you? "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America" was his urgent invitation. Obama called for a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. "This is the price and the promise of citizenship," our new president concluded. But I say to you, that for us, as Christians, that is the price and the promise of our discipleship.

Yes, sometimes there are calls from God that are so urgent and demanding that they require an immediate reply. So it was for those fishermen who heard Jesus calling their name. Jesus called. They followed. And on the beach that day, Peter and Andrew, James and John had their lives turned upside down. Come to think of it, their response might have been the climactic moment of their lifelong discipleship, because they spent the rest of their lives being questionable companions to the One who called. Writes Agnes Norfleet, "Repeatedly Jesus rebukes them for their inability to see where he is leading, and they try to prevent Jesus from the hard path toward the cross. But they stick with him nonetheless and at the very beginning they do so with reckless abandon. We don't get it right all the time any more than Peter and Andrew, James and John, but that voice of Jesus calling them resonates deep within us still. From time to time it gives us courage to respond to Christ by being useful in bold and risky ways."

I like to think that every time we baptize, no matter what the age of the person being baptized, we initiate that beloved child or adult into the Christian life. In effect we say to that person, “The life you live is not your own. You are named, claimed, and commandeered. God has plans for you. God has a job for you. This is good news because the saddest of all sad things in this world is an uncalled, unclaimed life. Now, go live out your calling.” (Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, 34.1, p.19)

Ah, yes, how true that was for Jayne Drapala. I have heard many stories from her as well as from many of you about the significance of her day of baptism. It was a day that changed her life. As an adult, she came to the sure and certain knowledge that she needed Jesus in her life. There had always been something missing. And once she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, life was never the same. Jesus claimed her and gave her a calling to teach and love and reach out in Christ’s love to others, including everyone, excluding no one. And Jayne believed that whether she lived or whether she died, Jesus would be there for her. And so for better and for worse, through sickness and health, Jesus love never wavered nor did Jayne’s faith in Jesus ever fail.

“Follow me” Jesus summons. “And your life will never be the same. And from that moment on, according to Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* In this wonderfully wise and blessedly brief “graduation speech” this distinguished man of letter, the late Dr. Seuss, suggests where discipleship might take us.

Congratulations! (he writes)
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
So...

be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
you're off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So...get on your way!

O, the places we’ll go when we respond to Jesus’ invitation to “Follow me.” We know that there is nothing easy about our response. It requires commitment and patience, a willingness to fail and the strength to try again and again. It means addressing hard issues, overcoming oppression wherever it is found, and having the God given courage to keep on keeping on. Yes, the work of following Jesus is real. It has the shape that only we can fill. We are made to be used by the God who created us. So with all of your body, all of your mind and all of your soul, say “Yes” when you hear the call of Jesus in your life and be prepared for the places you’ll go!.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.