

HEARING WITH THE HEART
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 and Mark 1: 14-21
January 24, 2021
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday night, March, 1991, I heard these words from my pastor: “Have you thought about going to seminary?”

Many of you have heard me say that I laughed. But the question would not go away. A job change in 1992 sent me to Huntsville, Texas and the question did not go away. 1993 as the leaves were falling from the trees, I reluctantly said “yes” to God. My background was in education and research. I taught from books, but not the heart, or so I tried to convince myself. That is when I felt the Spirit chuckle and say to me, “What do you think the Bible is; it is a book you have studied with your heart?”

So, it was settled. I got up and went to Austin Seminary! I was going to become a Certified Christian Educator. That was comfortable for me. Low and behold the Spirit started rumbling in my tummy again, asking me to listen with my heart, because I had the heart of a pastor. So many conversations followed. *Lord, I am afraid. I know teaching. I do not know preaching. I am afraid. What if I fail the church? What if no one wants a female pastor? What if I say something that hurts the church? Lord, my comfort zone and joy comes from teaching little ones the stories of God’s love and how Jesus showed us to love, too. I can do that.*

When I finally allowed my ears to cut through the world’s noises, and my excuses, I heard the voice of God. *This is not about you, Sherry. This is how I want to work in and through you.* The heart heard and now almost 24 years later, I continue every single day hearing from my heart what God wants to work in and through me.

And that is why I love these stories of Samuel, Eli, the voice in the dark, and the fishermen. On the one hand, we have Jonah **reluctantly** getting up and going to do the mission God has asked of him; and, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, on the other, **immediately** getting up and going to follow Jesus as he carries out God’s mission. There is more to the “immediately” part, but more about that later.

What I find most comforting and joyful is God’s sense of humor. Whether we are running or running in place, God still trusts us, humans that we are, to be his instruments of forgiveness, mercy, and love as we are Christ to one another.

Speaking of running, listen how Fred Buechner Summarizes Jonah’s reluctance and God’s faithfulness in showing Jonah just how important he was (and we are) to God’s plan of mending relationships with and between humans. It is a very timely reminder for us.

When God ordered Jonah to Ninevah to tell the people to shape and get saved, Jonah’s facial expression resembled what happens when there is a septic tank problem. Jonah did not want these foreigners to be saved, he wanted them to get what he thought was coming to them. He tried to run from God’s call and instead gets swallowed by a big fish.

Within minutes, the big fish suffered a severe attack of acid indigestion, and out of the mouth of the fish flies Jonah. Not hard to imagine since Jonah's attitude was enough to curdle milk. In the end, with a bit of prodding, Jonah does as God has asked, but hating every minute of it. When the Ninevites actually listen to God's voice, through Jonah, and promise to shape up, Jonah is furious. He throws a tantrum and parks his sullen self under a plant for shade. God seizes the opportunity by causing the plant to shrivel, losing its shade, and putting Jonah back in the blazing sun. God knows Jonah's anger is not about exposure to the sun, it is about God giving the Ninevites, sinners that they were, another chance. Humoring Jonah a bit, God says to him, "Here you are, all upset out of pity for one small plant that has shriveled up and caused you to be hot, so what's wrong with having pity for this whole place that's headed for Hades in a handcart if something's not done about it? Humor yes, but the message is clear: Judgment is God's call, not ours.

What a great story. At first the voice of God was not immediately recognizable. It was not until Eli nudged him that Samuel entertained the notion that he was being called by God. The truth is the voice of God is not always immediately identifiable. Sometimes the voice of God sounds like a human voice saying, "Get up and go!" The God whose Word became flesh, according to the Gospel of John, uses human beings to get the work done and the Word spoken. And so maybe if we want to know what God is saying we should not be waiting for the sky to break open and a voice to come to us out of the blue.

Maybe we should listen carefully to the voices that speak to us of God's goodness and the life path of Jesus. Buechner goes on to say: Listen to your life, listen to your own heart, because that is how and where God summons us.

The story is great because even after Samuel recognizes God's voice, there is not a lot of detailed instruction. Mostly it is a "head's up" flexibility is in the air. While there is no written-out plan for the direction of Samuel's life, he does learn he will leave Eli and join another family. In a phrase, he was "put on notice" by God. From his sleep-like state, he came to notice that God cared about him, knew his name, did have plans for him, and that, well, God would get back to him.

God was not toying with Samuel. God was preparing this messenger for a lifetime of conversations and messages that the world would need to hear. God's conversation with this child was not a one-and-done adventure; it was the adventure of a lifetime. And that is what God wants with us, a lifetime of venturing together.

And it was a conversation that God has with Simon, Andrew, James, and John long before Jesus speaks to them about a new journey in life. Walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees Simon, and Andrew, doing what they were taught and trained to do—fish! It was their livelihood. Jesus speaks and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And, of all the things they could have said and done, they followed. Walking further, they discover the old fisherman, Zebedee and his sons, James and John, repairing their nets. "Follow me," he says, and they leave their nets, boat, and father, and follow him.

So, here is where the “immediate part” comes into play. What follows is not about taking away the unfettered faith that the fishermen had in Jesus, but it does shed some insight on the context of the story. I told Jan Anderson that some of her research from a Gleaners class lesson would most likely end up in a sermon; I did not realize it would be this quick. So, thank you Jan.

If you remember, Jesus began his ministry in the region around Galilee. Most likely, his reputation as a teacher and healer was known to Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Then, add to that the story in Luke’s gospel of Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law from fever, and we would be justified in saying that Jesus was not an “unknown” to these men. But still, asking someone to leave the very thing that pays the bills, that could be a stretch, or maybe not as stretchy as we think.

Historically, the Jewish religious education system, all boys went to school to learn the Torah. If a student showed promise, he was invited to keep studying the prophets, but if not, he went to learn the family trade. If a student showed promise in studying the prophets, he was invited to the honor of further study of the poetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. If the boy did not seem bright enough to keep studying, he would be sent back home to learn the family trade. If a student showed promise after learning the Torah, prophets, and writings, a rabbi would tell him simply, “Follow me.” The student would never turn down the great honor of studying under a rabbi. Simon and his companions were going about their family trade the day Jesus performed the miracle at Simon’s house. The fact that they were tending to their trades and not seated at the feet of the rabbis, tells us that at some point in their education, they were told they were not gifted enough to continue. No rabbi would want them. What a blessing that this rabbi, Jesus, came to them and invited them to be his students! Jesus does not care what the world says about a person, or how the world has evaluated them, and I add from Samuel’s encounter, or what age, Jesus knows the heart and calls us to follow.

The commentator goes on to say that: There was no “Orientation to Discipleship” class, no study period, no courses in theology and history, no communication workshops, just Jesus’ call and their response. In the faithful act of following, not thinking about following, we learn what we need to know. When Jesus summons us to follow, all we need do is respond with a willingness, with courage and with faithful getting up and going.

Those first disciples, like us, will stumble repeatedly. Sometimes they remained mystified about who Jesus really was. They wondered what Jesus really wanted them to do. They tried to keep little children away from him. They argued they did not have enough food to feed a hungry crowd. They wanted to know what was going to get the best seat at the heavenly table. Judas betrayed. Peter denied.

To follow Jesus does not mean never stumbling, never failing, never betraying or sinning, never disappointing him or yourself. To be a Christian is to follow him as best we can, where we are. Instead of asking “what would Jesus do,” instead do what Jesus did as witnessed in Holy Scripture. The truth is Jesus said simply “Follow me.” Of course, it matters what we believe. It matters whether we are guided by Jesus as we come to our own conclusions about what is right and moral and true regarding the challenging moral questions of our day. But it is secondary. What comes first is Jesus’ summons and your, our, willingness to follow.

Martin Luther once said that no livelihood is dearer to God than any other. God calls each of us to the vocation of loving God and loving our neighbors. The summons to follow comes every day, and in one way or another, we answer. Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. Not now. And sometimes, I am afraid to follow. And yet, we still have this promise that in our following, we begin to better understand the journey, we begin to better know Jesus as our Lord, and we begin to walk more fully in faith, living into the call that Jesus has for our lives.

A very real possibility is that, like Samuel and the four fishermen, we may not know the details of God's call on our lives, but when we answer yes, even with reluctance, we still have the promise that God was, is and will be working out the details in and through us.

God loved Jonah. God loved "those people." God loves us. None of us can out-run or out-row God's love. As quickly as Jonah tries to run away from God, the fishermen quickly move toward Jesus who comes with an open invitation to life-changing possibilities they never imagined. For Samuel, Eli, and the four, it is a call to re-evaluate God's life's purpose for them.

What if Mark leaves out the details of the decision-making process, not just because of the religious historical context, but also because following Jesus, is bottom line, a matter of the heart, trusting that in our hesitations and in our eagerness, God is in the details. If we are following Jesus with our hearts, the traditions, programs, the missions, the causes of Christ's church will align with God's purposes. And whether we follow reluctantly or eagerly, either way, the Spirit guides our steps.

What I find most comforting and delightful about God's sense of humor is that whether we are running or remaining in place, God still trusts us, humans that we are, to be his instruments of forgiveness, mercy, and love as we are Christ to one another. I pray we continue to find God's leading, God's prodding, and most certainly, God's humor in all our callings as we open ourselves up to being people transformed by the Spirit to be more like Jesus. Amen.