Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2024

Jonah 3

Over the years, I have developed a fondness for the story of Jonah. The more I read it, the more I find it both funny and challenging.

There’s so much we can learn from the story of Jonah. But it’s paired this week with Mark telling us about Jesus calling his first disciples. Which got me to thinking that there must be some reason why we would benefit from hearing the texts together.

When we hear the stories of the disciples being called, we’re often invited to consider what it means to be called ourselves. For each of us to have a vocation, holy work that we’re called to do.

It’s too easy to just say that Jonah serves as an example of what *not* to do. He ***was***, technically, obedient. But it feels like he was only obedient because he didn’t want to spend another 3 days in the belly of the fish. Or worse.

To be fair, Jonah’s hesitancy is understandable. The Assyrians had been flexing their military might for a while, and they eventually defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, sending 10 of the tribes of Israel into an exile they did not return from.

But his animosity led him to outright disobedience of God that placed others in harm’s way. And to finding a place outside Nineveh to settle in for a little while, hoping to watch God send destruction upon the city. Only to have God point out that, just as Jonah had been concerned about the bush God appointed to grow and offer him shelter – even wanting to *die* because God let it wither – God was similarly concerned about the thousands of people in Nineveh.

Imagine being Jonah and hearing *that.*

I think the first connection we can find between the story of Jonah and the story of the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John is that there are times when what we experience is going to shake us up. When it’s going to challenge what we think about God. What God’s compassion and mercy are like, and to whom God chooses to extend them.

Throughout the Gospels, we see the 12 having to navigate just that, as Jesus treated people they considered outsiders, like the Samaritan Woman at the Well and Roman soldiers, with the same compassion that he demonstrated to Israelites.

Those moments taught the 12, and us, that God’s concern extends to all that God has created, and that we’re invited to learn to love those it feels easier to hate.

Another connection between these two stories is the idea that God has a habit of calling imperfect people to serve. And that God doesn’t expect that answering the call will suddenly make us flawless individuals.

Just look at the people Jesus called as his apostles.

I can’t help but wonder which one of the other 11 was paired with Judas when Jesus sent them out 2 by 2. And what that guy thought after Judas betrayed Jesus.

Thomas gets grief about doubting, but in the midst of the story about Jesus raising Lazarus, Thomas is the one who says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

I can never quite figure out if I think he’s being sarcastic, deeply committed to following Jesus, or throwing up his hands and accepting what he thinks is inevitable. Or maybe all three.

James and John, after hearing Jesus predict his death and resurrection, come up to him and say, “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Not sure *that’s* the most appropriate response to hearing someone say that they’re going to be flogged and crucified.

And then there’s Peter. I think my favorite story about him is when he decides to hop out of the boat and walk on the water. Because it’s something he seems to think he needs to do to demonstrate his faith, but Jesus never asks him to do it.

Which, come to think of it, is an excellent thing to think about when we’re considering what it means to be faithful disciples. And maybe ties back to Jonah wanting to serve as gatekeeper or hall monitor for God.

In the end, in some fashion, all 12 disciples abandon Jesus when he is arrested and put on trial. But it’s important for us to remember that for 11 of them, their story doesn’t end there.

After the resurrection, Jesus doesn’t choose new disciples. He doesn’t scold the 11. He doesn’t punish them. He doesn’t say, “I’m disappointed in you.” Or “Guys, that wasn’t cool, but I understand why you did it.”

Matthew tells us that Jesus appeared to them and said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spiritand teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Luke tells us that Jesus shared a meal with them, opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and blessed them.

John tells us that Jesus offered them peace and breathed into them the Holy Spirit. And told Peter, “Feed my sheep.”

Basically, Jesus gave them all an opportunity to try again. Not to forget what had happened, but to learn from it and carry the memory with them, and do better.

Isn’t that God does with Jonah? After Jonah tries to run as far away as possible, trying to hide from God, God again tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Not just for a second chance for him to be obedient, but a second chance for him to learn that God’s compassion and mercy is greater than he imagined.

Mark’s story starts off with the news that John had been arrested, and Jesus headed to Galilee, proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Repentance isn’t just feeling sorry for what we’ve done that wasn’t loving. It’s finding a new way to ***be*** in the world, a way that’s rooted in God’s love for us and for all that God has created. And our discipleship – the unique calling that each of us has – is about bearing witness to that love. It’s about being called to a way of being in the world that reflects God’s grace and love. Where we don’t just receive love; we respond to it by learning to love our neighbors as we are loved by God.

Kate Bowler, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, talks about trying to try. She says that trying to try allows us to embrace the messiness of life and our imperfect efforts to be faithful. Without the added pressure we can be tempted to put on ourselves, or put on others, we might find we are better able to give and receive love.

Did Jonah try to try? Maybe. And maybe that’s why I like his story so much. He reminds us what it looks like when we try to be faithful, but our hearts just aren’t in it.

As we try to try in our lives of discipleship, may we have hearts that are open to God’s transforming love, and a willingness to respond to that love by trying to love our neighbors as we are loved.

1. John 11:16 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 10:37 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 28:19-20 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)