

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

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There is a quote attributed to Bp John Shelby Spong and one can always get into trouble for quoting Spong “No one should ever seek ordination unless that person is compelled to do so out of a driving sense that this is something that he or she must do.” In good company with Martin Luther who is supposed to have said to the council questioning his writings, “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.” Hearing, listening and then following through on God’s prodding or a call is a journey. Today’s reading of calls, from Mark’s telling of the calls of four fishermen and their rapid response; “And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” to Jonah’s reluctant, resistive response “But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.” (1:3) As if one can escape the presence of God?

Jonah’s story has always appealed to me. This short, four-chapter book, among the minor prophets, is full of humor, irony and is a literary satire. It is not a historical book, recalling events that actually happened, it is used by the author to convey his message. The author working on themes of repentance, the importance and saving of all of God’s creation also pokes a big stick at all those who prophesy God’s love and acceptance, yet preach God’s hate of all those who are different.

The setting for the Book of Jonah is in the Northern Kingdom, Israel, during the time of Assyrian Empire and its threats to its neighbors. There was a prophet named Jonah son of Amittai, mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 and the author may have reached back and used the name to grant authenticity to the story and points to the themes of God’s compassion and mercy in both books as the Northern Kingdom is spared in Kings and in Jonah, Nineveh is forgiven. The text and references place the writing the Book of Jonah 200-400 years after the fall of The Northern Kingdom, during the Second Temple period, approximately 450 BCE.

Jonah doesn’t refuse God’s call because he is too busy or would have to give up too much or too afraid of the consequences of following the call; he is a resister. He knows that if the evil

people of Nineveh listen and respond to his prophecy and repent; that God will spare them. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and an enemy of Israel, and Jonah wants it destroyed. He also knows that the test of a prophecy is that it comes true. He knows and trusts God enough to know that if Nineveh listens to Jonah, something that doesn't happen to prophets, God will forgive Nineveh and not fulfill the prophecy. Therefore, Jonah will be a false prophet.

Today's reading starts with Jonah's second chance "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Jonah then marched to Nineveh and walked about a third of the way into the city, stopped on a street corner and preach an eight-word sermon, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Then Jonah waited for God to act. Meanwhile the people reacted with a fast and sackcloth and ashes. When the king of Nineveh heard, in the portion of the scripture reading the Lectionary left out, his declaration went even further, to include the animals and no water as part of the fast. So, the people Nineveh responded immediately to Jonah's prophecy, recognizing the power of the Israelite God. And God did exactly as Jonah had predicted.

"¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." Or as John C. Holbert put it "Jonah was an honest man. Although mercy disgusted him, he knew his ways were not God's ways. If the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah was sure God would embrace them. "And God did just that.

Jonah pouted and God had a discussion with Jonah "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. 'And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' (4:2,3) Then Jonah went out of the city made camp and sat down to await further developments. We get to hear about the bush that God raises one night and causes a worm to destroy the next night and again Jonah pouts because the protection of the bush is gone. And God's response to Jonah 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?'... "¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Where have we been called in the past and have ignored, excused, avoided or just resisted that soft, or not so still voice? During my times here, Saint Paul's has responded to the call of Family Promise, Friendship House, the Wanabsi family and listened to stories of a Vietnamese refugee family. There is the ongoing journey with Resurrección and how these two communities can walk together to support each other's calls.

I spent 30 years avoiding a persistent call. Part of that time the Episcopal Church had to rediscover the diaconate but as I have said before I scratched that call by being a nurse and then someone said, "Have you thought of becoming a deacon?" Paul has his own call which he can describe as he will. Saint Paul's has been called in the past to community service, refugees, homeless, hunger and housing ministries and is now in a time of call and discernment.

Paul has brought to and the vestry has discerned that Saint Paul's should engage in a ministry from Underground Ministries joining One Parish One Prisoner where the entire congregation will come alongside a prisoner being released by Washington State Department of Corrections into the community. There is a commitment to being part of a team that will learn together and work to support the prisoner as they finish the last years of their sentence and to continue the relationship once the prisoners has been released and is transitioning back into community. Resurrección has been invited to partner in this ministry. You will be hearing more soon.

In the Deacon's Examination at ordination the bishop states "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. . . . you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time." Then at the end of the examination the bishop asks "My brother or sister, do you believe that you are truly called by God and [God's] Church to the life and work of a deacon?" and the deacon replies "I believe I am so called." I also believe that it is also part of my calling and the diakonia of the congregation to take the needs concerns and the hopes of the church to the world. In light of that challenge I proposed to the vestry that Saint Paul's should again tithe it's income outside of its walls. And the vestry agreed. There is a group now forming called Participation in Healing responsible for recommending the disbursement of those funds to the vestry. I am asking you to consider ministries and non-profit organizations that you believe could use support from Saint Paul's locally, within the Diocese of Olympia area and in

the world outside those two boundaries and asking you to send those to me with a paragraph of why you believe that support is needed.

Calls are funny things. They can be exciting and electric as for Simon, Andrew, James and John and probably vexing for old man Zebedee. They can be missed and I believe often are because they are just not heard or maybe not listened for. But I have observed over the years that most often calls are persistent as Jonah found, hard to resist. As Abraham Lincoln said, “The Almighty has his own purpose” We must remember that each of the people called in the Bible had their Jonah moment of “not me” “and when God calls, it is our joyful task to follow. And it is God’s agenda that wins.” (Mary W. Anderson, The Christian Century January 5, 2000)

As Amanda Gorman’s Inauguration poem begins:

When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade
We've braved the belly of the beast
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace
And the norms and notions
of what just is
Isn't always just-ice.

A call to pay attention