

Sermon: Taking the First Step

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20**

This week's readings continue the theme of the call to discipleship that began last week in the Gospel according to John and in the first book of Samuel. It took awhile for Samuel to understand that it was God calling him but once he did, he was all in for the rest of his life. In John's Gospel, Jesus 'found' Philip who 'found' Nathanael, who wasn't convinced about Jesus at all until after the Son of God told him some things that only Nathanael would know.

Which brings us to today's readings. We've all heard the story of Jonah, so we needn't go into it too much. But when the news of the fast proclaimed by the *people* reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then **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. Human 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. *Who knows?* God may relent and change his mind...' (Jonah 3:6-9). Another case of following the people's will, except the king's proclamation was a sign of true repentance. The entire city repented without knowing whether it would work or not, but they realized how far off the mark they had been.

Noah's great-grandson, Nimrod, built Nineveh. But we also remember Nineveh as the Babylonian capital city and that when Cyrus defeated Babylon, he allowed the exiled Israelites to return home. The point seems to be that if *Nineveh*, that vast and corrupt city, can turn from their evil, violent ways, then anyone can.

Years ago, I worked with a guy named Jim (who was about this tall) and the company sent him to Tokyo to set up a new office. He loved Japan and Japanese culture, he was fluent in the language and that's why they sent him.

Except he did stand out a little bit. After six months or so, I asked him how it was going over there. He had some comments about the size of his apartment, but then he said that if he left the office and went down into the subway, rode in any direction for 45 minutes and then came back up to street level, he'd still be in Tokyo. Do that in Boston and you'll find yourself beyond the end of the line, waiting for a taxi or your Uber driver.

Fly into Los Angeles at night and all you can see are the lights of Los Angeles, spread out over something like 500 square miles. Without comparing L.A. to Nineveh, it could take three days to *drive* across the city, if you pick the wrong highway. Jonah might have trouble with the six-lane side streets. Nobody walks in L.A.

The Jonah story might be fanciful in a number of ways, but in it, everyone repents, even God. It also shows that God's power is universal. God will send just the right person at just the right time to just the right place to offer salvation.

Meanwhile, back in Galilee, Jesus began his ministry only after John had left the stage, so to speak, and before we even knew what John's message meant. It's hard to say if that's the way Jesus would have wanted it, but maybe John's arrest was a signal for Jesus to get started. Anyway, after John was arrested, Jesus proclaimed that the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near – repent, and believe in the good news. And the first thing he did was gather in some disciples.

And who did he call? Not the religious elite, not some economists, no bureaucrats or community organizers. No, in the poorest region of the country, along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew at work, fishing, and he said to them, 'Follow me.' A little further on, he saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them too. They all left behind a way of life, an occupation that, if nothing else, could at least feed them. James and John also left their father behind. Nobody walks away from their family. Yet they knew somehow that Jesus had called them into a new way of being, a new identity: as fishers for people, taking people where they probably did not plan to go.

Mark uses the word 'immediately' fairly often and he uses it twice here. There is no delay – Jesus calls, you follow. We follow because he has come to *us* and called *us*. As in the story of Samuel's call, God takes the initiative.

Are these men acting on impulse? They don't know anything about Jesus, who he is or where he's from. But they seem to see their choice quite clearly, as did the people of Nineveh. However long it takes for us to get to that choice, it only takes a moment to make it, and it lasts a lifetime. As we've said before, 'when God gets ya, yer got.'

So who is really taking the first step here? Jesus does the calling but it's the men who respond. They have no apparent skills for ministry; they're fishermen. They're starting from zero with no preconceived notions of what it is they were called to do. But now they are disciples – their new role is to watch and learn and to follow, which has two meanings: first, literally, to follow behind Jesus as watchful observers, and to take up his ministry after him. In that sense, we follow Jesus too.

Of all the people we know, we've only met one person who has ever gone to the same church for regular Sunday worship, from his baptism to right about now. Everyone else has either shifted their faith tradition or their denominational affiliation or their church membership within a denomination. Even so, when we do come to church, wherever it is, we're joining others who have also responded to God's call.

Mark's passage begins ominously – John has been arrested. Mark's audience knew all about it. They knew and understood the risks and insecurities that following Jesus' call might include. For us, the odds of being persecuted just for following Jesus are extremely low, but still fairly high in places like Egypt and Syria. And yet, they persist, to coin a phrase.

Like our friend who has only ever gone to one church, Christianity has always been about a moment and a lifetime. The beginning of God's reign happens when we hear and respond. We don't need to know anything about it in advance – 'Christianity' wasn't even a word when Jesus began his ministry – but he will teach us what we need to know about being human.

God knows someone has to take the first steps toward discipleship and to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. God takes the first step by repeatedly calling us, as with Samuel or Jonah, and we take the first step to new life in our response to the call. Entering into that relationship is transformative and lifelong. But we need to take steps to achieve it, without resorting to sackcloth and ashes.

Amen.