

‘Invitation to Follow’ -- Jonah 3:1-5,10-4:3; MK1:14-20
St. David’s, January 29, 2012
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Today’s scripture readings show us 2 different responses to an invitation to follow. Jonah was a reluctant follower; in fact, he tried to run away. If we’d read the first part of the book we would have seen Jonah being invited by God to be part of a great work in Nineveh – and Jonah getting on a fast boat headed in the other direction! And even when Jonah did accept God’s invitation, he did it reluctantly.

The 4 disciples in the account in Mark’s gospel were just the opposite. They dropped everything and followed Jesus immediately.

The description of the calling of the four disciples by the Sea of Galilee is in all the gospels. When we read the other gospels we get details that Mark hasn’t included. For example, we know that this wasn’t the first time Peter and Andrew, James and John had met Jesus. The other gospels are quite a bit longer than Mark’s gospel. In them we find a good deal more detail about certain events as well as narratives Mark doesn’t include.

Comparing the gospels helps us to a more full understanding of Jesus and the disciples, which can be very helpful. But looking specifically at the differences each writer brings to the telling of the same event is also important, for each writer is highlighting a different part of the good news.

There are no stories of Jesus’ birth or childhood in Mark’s gospel, no genealogies or prologue. Mark cuts straight to the heart of the good news; that Jesus Christ has come to bring God’s kingdom to earth;

Mark is somewhat abrupt in his telling of the events of that day, but that’s intentional – he doesn’t want to cloud the message. His message is clear. When we hear the good news our response should be like that of the disciples. Repent, believe, (v 15) and follow (v 17).

We tend to think of ‘repenting’ as being sorry for the things we’ve done wrong, or of turning away from sin, but that’s only part of the meaning of the word ‘repent’ in Mark’s gospel. The Greek word Mark uses [*metanoia*] means not only turning away from a negative; it means to change the direction of our life in a positive way; it means to turn from a life focussed on oneself, and to a life focussed on God.

To turn to God and God's way is a positive change. Obviously it means turning away from sin, but equally important is where we turn to. It is possible to turn away from one wrong direction and take a different, but no better, path.

To repent as Jesus calls us to do in Mark's gospel involves a shift in the direction of our life.... a shift to God.

Repent, believe, follow. After repentance comes belief. We are to believe the good news that Jesus died for us and lives for us; that by believing in Him we will receive forgiveness, abundant life and eternal life.

The world tries to tell us that the good news is not really as good as it sounds... that it will cost us too much, or that it's too good to be true, or even that real men, real women, don't need anything but themselves to live a life of fulfilment.

Jesus says "Believe the good news"... it's good for you! You can have abundant life – a meaningful life filled with forgiveness; hope and joy; peace and love now, and then eternal life with God. What better news is there?

Repent, believe, follow.

Repentance and belief are the first steps, but they aren't enough. We're called to follow. And that can be scary, can't it?

Most people don't jump at the chance to follow where Jesus leads. Oh, it's not uncommon for people to want to do something for God, but they want to decide what it will be; preferably something they are comfortable with – something safe.

But often Jesus asks us to follow him where it's not comfortable. He asks us to change and grow and do a new thing. And instead of following we make excuses.

I certainly have, and if you're honest you'll admit you have too. I spent over a year being a Jonah when God was calling me to the ordained ministry. I tried to run in the opposite direction.

When Jesus is calling us to follow a new path we think... 'I don't have any gifts or skills... or 'Jane could do it better'... or maybe 'I'm not important enough for God to be calling me...' 'I can't...' 'I don't know how...'

And, if we're honest, 'I'm afraid...'

But each one of us is called to follow...

We're not called to save the world by ourselves... Just to follow.

When Jesus calls us, he gives us the spiritual gifts we will need. Following Jesus means using these gifts to serve and bear witness to him, whether it's taking a homemade meal to a shut-in, singing in the choir or leading worship. It could be teaching Sunday school, fixing a frozen pipe in the bathroom, or organizing the finances. It could be sharing from your heart at Bible study, praying for others, visiting in the hospital, making a banner or bringing muffins and making tea for an early morning meeting... It could be a call to a ministry in the church on the Board of Managers or the Session.

This congregation is in the process of calling people to serve through joining the Board of Managers, and on the Session.

In the Presbyterian Church in Canada we believe that God speaks to us in many ways, including through His creation, through prayer, through His Word in scripture, through the Holy Spirit and through His people.

One very important way Jesus calls us is through God's people. That's why ministers and elders are chosen through prayerful consideration by the people of the congregation. As we progress through the process of electing elders in the next weeks, please pray for God to make clear the people He is calling to the eldership. Please prayerfully read the information that is being distributed. When the ballots are circulated, prayerfully consider who would make a good elder, and vote accordingly. And if you are approached to serve, consider prayerfully that this is a call from God through the congregation – Jesus saying 'Follow me'.

That day by the sea Jesus spoke to 4 men casting their nets for fish. He gave them a command, 'Follow me...' and he gave them a promise; 'I will send you out to fish for people'. They followed and were caught up into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus calls those who follow Him to spread the good news by our words and deeds so others will also be caught up into the Kingdom of God.

For Mark, one of the key things for Jesus followers to grasp is that the fundamental quality of the faithful disciple is to say 'yes' to Jesus' invitation to follow. Mark ends his telling of the story with the four disciples leaving their nets to follow. He wants us to grasp the essential fact of discipleship. When Jesus calls, we are to follow. Period. Because it's only by following that we are caught up into the kingdom of God. It's only by following that we come to really know the one we

follow. The disciples got it right that day.

Jonah didn't. When God asked him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to the people there, Jonah began running in the opposite direction. After his adventure with the fish, Jonah relented and set off to Nineveh – but he didn't repent. He didn't turn to God's way of doing things. He went to Nineveh wanting to see God destroy the city and all its inhabitants. Jonah didn't think the Ninevites deserved forgiveness, and he wanted to see them get what they deserved! And when the Ninevites repented and God forgave them, Jonah threw a temper tantrum. The last we see of him, he's sitting in the hot sun, refusing to allow God to comfort him, and refusing to listen.

How different from the disciples who followed Jesus and were caught up into the Kingdom of God! Oh, we know the disciples didn't always get it right from there on in. They made mistakes – sometimes big ones! But during their time with Jesus they learned to repent of their mistakes, to keep believing, to turn back and follow. And following the resurrection and Ascension of our Lord, they showed how well they had learned. They continued to follow and the world was changed!

We receive the same invitation to follow. At times we, like the disciples that day on the seashore, get it right. At other times we stumble, we falter, we even turn away. But Christ never turns away from us. He keeps calling us to repent, believe, and follow again... to spread the good news through our words and actions so others will also be caught up into the kingdom...

Repent, believe, follow...

This is the command of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, whom to know is love and peace and to follow is life abundant and eternal.

May we listen for his voice speaking through His Spirit and His people, and follow with faith. AMEN