

Sermon January 25, 2009

It seems crazy sometimes, doesn't it? Christianity. Implausible. Far-fetched. It sometimes seems a world reserved for the dim and the gullible. Crazier still, those who act on that belief, sacrificially. Risking life and limb and the welfare of loved ones... banking on truths unseen. Risky, perhaps irresponsibly so, particularly when the drawbacks are obvious and unfavorable results seem certain.

Today's texts offer us two responses to God's invitation to such costly risk taking. The Gospel of Mark recounts the early days of Jesus' ministry. The call of the first four disciples. Simon, Andrew, James and John. Fishermen. Making their living filling the nets they were busy mending. Until then...until he came. And invited them to leave it all, friends and livelihood, even family... to pack up and follow. And they do. The question is *why*? Why would they *do* that?

Was there a quality of grace about him? Was it the wisdom of his teaching? The performance of miracles. Or was it his ability to see them as they had never been seen before? Or did Jesus possess a curious light. *The light*. The light of Epiphany. Did he glow? Did he emanate peace that passed understanding? Why was *he* the one they followed?

The curious abandon of these early disciples is even more puzzling given Mark's first line in today's text. "After John was arrested." Remember John the Baptist had announced the coming King, the arrival of the long awaited messiah. He had preached that the end had come, that Israel was about to be restored. As *Alleluia he is coming*, became *Alleluia he is here*.

Self proclaimed Messiahs and prophets were plentiful in those days. And since there were so many prophets, the way the true would be separated from the false was fairly simple...did their stuff come true. So here we have Jesus' lead man, his campaign manager, if you will, predicting immediate restoration of Israel brought about by a divine apocalypse... This guy is sitting in prison. Just sitting there. Busted for a petty altercation with a government official. Outside the prison, not much had changed. No shock and awe. No military coup. Clearly he was not a true prophet. John the Baptizer, just another crazy charlatan. It is at *this* moment, that Jesus calls these disciples. Follow me. Why would anyone follow Jesus...*after John was arrested*?

I think it is noteworthy that when they were called, they were mending their nets. They were shoring up their means of income. Their pride. Their ability to provide for their families. I imagine they would have been pretty focused repairmen, given the import of their mission. Mending the nets. And along came Jesus, the teacher, inviting them to come and fish for people. *What?*

Cultural distance aside, I feel fairly confident that I would not have gone. I do not believe that I would have thrown my hat in with Jesus...*after John was arrested.*

But these four did, with apparent ease. Before we distance ourselves completely from these oddly trusting men, intimidated by a purity of faith that we are fairly certain we do not and might never share, before we shut that door...let us consider one thing. Given the testimonies of the rest of this and the other gospel, it does not appear that the disciples knew to follow Jesus because they were spiritual or moral rock stars. They got it wrong... a lot. Their character flaws were legion and their missteps innumerable. Even unto the end, when they denied him before the authorities and slept during his darkest hour. They were broken and self-involved. It is likely they felt as lost and unsure in spiritual matters as we do. And yet, they went. And because they went, here we sit. Not so unlike them after all.

Our Old Testament reading today is from the book of Jonah. A legend, a delightful and humorous tale (especially in its original language. It is rife with delightful wordplay.) Along the lines of a Shakespearian comedy. *Much Ado about Nineveh.* Our text today begins with this phrase... "*the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.*" We likely remember what happened the first time, or at least the broad strokes.

This is the story: God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh, a corrupt city, and tell them that if they repent, God will not destroy them. This upsets Jonah, who thinks that the Ninevites deserve whatever they get. So he pouts, and frets, and finally runs away. He takes a ship as far away as he can possibly go, to Tarshish, a city at the end of the known world. But there is a storm, and in desperation the sailors toss Jonah -- who had told them he was fleeing from God -- into the sea, and Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. Jonah prays to the Lord for three days from inside his guts, and at the end of that time the

Lord tells the fish to literally vomit Jonah onto dry land. It is upon that shore that “*the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.*”

Now Jonah, I can identify with more easily. Jonah did not want to follow where God was leading. He did so begrudgingly, eventually, and only after extreme marine drama. Now, before we are too hard on Jonah let me tell you that the land of Nineveh was part of Assyria. The Assyrians had carried out repeated violent attacks on the Jewish people, burned cities, and destroyed families. So we can perhaps identify with Jonah’s objection to his call. (Nineveh, incidentally, is located in present day, Iraq.) Caring enough to call the Ninevites into fellowship with God, was preposterous to Jonah, in the wake of their evisceration of the nation of Israel. As preposterous perhaps, as responding to the call of Jesus...*after John was arrested.* In the end, Jonah did go. And because he went, a city was delivered from evil.

What is God’s word to us in all of this, today?

Clearly there is encouragement to respond to God’s call as we experience and understand it; being faithful in what we know is right and needful in our spiritual lives; proclaiming the good news despite repercussions; giving sacrificially to God’s work in the world. Today we may experience this call, particularly its financial implications, as what today’s teens might call sketchy. In light of our present economic difficulties, after the fall of Wallstreet, the idea that we should now risk...anything at all...for an unseen God. Definitely sketchy. So how is it that anyone, in light of these barriers can respond to God with faithfulness...ever.

I hate to disappoint, but the answer is the same, yesterday, today and forever. We can respond with courage because our response to God’s call is not about us; it’s about God. It’s not about Jonah. The immediate repentance of the people of Nineveh was not the fruit of an eloquent sermon of Jonah’s that tugged at their heart strings. Jonah hated Nineveh! And his sermon was just one line: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” No, the people’s immediate response—God did that. God moved the soul of a nation, he touched their hearts and they touched God. For *Jonah’s sake*, he was invited into the process. God’s process of redeeming creation.

And what of our disciples? We have already noted that Mark did not attribute the faithful responses of the first four to any advanced spirituality. It was God in Christ whose power called them forth. God prepared them.

Through the ministry of John. Through their own journeys and experiences. God both called them and equipped them spiritually to respond to the call. The same was true of those who would later respond to the ministries of these four. It was all God's work. The disciples were invited into the work, that their spirits might be formed and their joy made complete.

We too are invited to participate in this work. We may be called to preach salvation to a Nineveh, or to reach out with kindness to a long time foe. Called to be president, or called to simply be present. Each one uniquely called and equipped to respond to God's leadings in our lives.

But what if we get it wrong? What if we mis-hear the call, and mess it up completely? We have no idea how to do this. It is not safer to leave it to the professionals? To us (motion to clergy). Listen, my dear friends, *please*...do not be afraid to be a Christian. To learn about God and to respond to God's call on your life. Do not be afraid. There is no need to fear failure in these things because we are not responsible for the fruits of our faithful actions. God is. We are called to be faithful in each moment, in each situation, to the best of our ability, aware that even our ability to respond with any degree of faithfulness, begins and ends in God.

Most of us as children of three or four were given the privilege of making cookies with a parent, or a kind adult. We stood on our stool, and were perhaps handed a stick of butter. Our job was to unwrap the butter and place it in the bowl, after which our guardian would beat the mixture and place the cookies in the oven, which he or she had set and would tend. If we were particularly good we might be given a beater to lick, or better yet, the bowl!

It helps me to think of my responses to God's call in this way. I am unwrapping the butter. I am being guided and instructed in this butter business, and as far as I am concerned, this is very serious business. Because if I mess up with this butter, then these cookies will be inedible, which would be disastrous.

And the truth, from the perspective of that kind adult who has aproned us and placed us on our stool is this... you, precious child, are not ultimately responsible for the production of these cookies. You have not grown or even gathered these ingredients. You do not even know how to turn the oven on, and this is a good thing... Not only are you not responsible for

these cookies, but you, sweetheart, you really can't mess 'em up. So you rip the paper, it can still be peeled. So you drop it on the ground. Lets say...on the ground in a pile of dirt...no mud! So you drop the butter in mud. Its OK. There are three more sticks in the box in the fridge. So let's say you drop all four...Fear not! I have money a car and there is a market right down the street. I can get us more butter... No problem. The bottom line is, precious anxious one, making these cookies, is not about the cookies. It is about us. Being together. Getting to know one another. Building our relationship. That's why you're up here on this stool. So we can play together. Create together and grow our love for each other. So, what do you say we get that butter unwrapped, and get to mixing. Cause I'm hungry (wink) and these cookies are going to be awesome!

Amen.