Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

*God’s Calling*

Whenever I think of being called to something – even before I look at some of the biblical stories like Jeremiah or Moses – I think of a movie from a number of years ago with John Denver and George Burns. I think its title was “O God” – but it’s been a while. John was a grocery store manager and George Burns, as God, was calling this regular guy, but John was having a difficult time believing what was happening to him. (I don’t remember the exact task John was called to, but I do remember him being challenged – who would believe him and could he really believe it himself – until God made it rain inside his car.) As with much that George Burns did, there was something delightfully humorous about the story, yet as you were laughing – there was truth about God revealed in that story too.

Jonah’s story may strike us that way too. Satirical, humorous and more, but there is truth there too. The word of the Lord came to Jonah to go to Nineveh - but that was NOT a job Jonah was interested in! I would bet most of us have been asked to do things we’d rather not do. It may be easier for us to avoid such tasks, but Jonah decided to make himself unavailable by going in the opposite direction – to Tarshish. (Nineveh was a great city in what was Babylon, now Iraq.) I think we can relate to Jonah’s not wanting to go to be among the people who had overrun Israel. So he sets off for Tarshish aboard a boat. But when the boat is at sea and Jonah asleep below deck a huge storm arises. The crew scramble to keep the ship aright but the storm only seems to worsen. The crew prays to any god they know to no avail. Eventually they begin to question what the cause is, and question Jonah who reveals that he wants to go to Tarshish because God wants him to go to Nineveh. There is a Jewish riff on this part of the story that describes the crew holding Jonah over the side of the boat and the storm calms a bit, then they lower him a bit more (up to his knees) and the storm subsides even more. Eventually they do as Jonah asks and lower him into the deep in order to stop the wild storm.

We know the next part – along comes a big fish and swallows Jonah. The three days Jonah spends in the belly of this big fish become a time of reckoning for Jonah and he prays to God for deliverance – and Jonah is spewed out of the fish onto dry land. From wherever he is beached Jonah reluctantly finds his way to Nineveh. It is described as a very large city so Jonah begins walking – a day’s journey and there he proclaims his seven-word sermon, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Somehow the word reaches the King who immediately puts on sackcloth and ashes and even decrees that all of Nineveh, even the animals, shall turn from their evil ways. (Can you picture that – cows running around with ashes on their heads?) But just maybe God may relent and change his mind.) And sure enough, Jonah is angry! He knew that if Nineveh repented that God “who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” would relent from punishing. Jonah is in a real funk! God’s compassion and radical inclusiveness isn’t something Jonah wants any part of. Is this a challenge to us to remember that God’s ways are not our ways?

I think many preachers wish their preaching could be even half as effective as was Jonah’s. It’s kind of funny too, that Jonah is effective in spite of himself. He really wanted Nineveh to be punished – but are we ever like that?

Shifting gears for a moment, let’s look at those few verses at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had been baptized by John and then spent forty days in the wilderness. Upon Jesus’ return from the wilderness we hear that John has been arrested, so immediately Jesus is picking up where John left off – preaching that the kingdom of God has come near. Now people need to repent and believe the good news. As Jesus is walking along by the Sea of Galilee, he meets some fishermen – first Simon and Andrew who were casting nets and then James and John who were in their boat. In both cases he invites these men to come with him. Mark doesn’t give us any sense that these men know anything about Jesus, but when he invites them, they don’t hesitate to leave behind their livelihood, their family and whatever responsibilities they may have had to follow him. – Hold on a minute! I believe following Jesus is very important, but I have a problem with just abandoning other responsibilities. I wonder how that really transpired?

How do we weigh the calls in our lives? I must admit I respond a lot more like Jonah than the disciples who “immediately” follow. I want to weigh the call to see if it fits in with the other parts of my life – will this really work? Even if this is God’s call to me, can I really do this? Can I do what I think I’m being called to and still carry through on other commitments I have made? (I heard some similar questions being asked about the decisions about selling the church.) So many questions – but I don’t hear any hesitation on the part of those Jesus called. They just seem to rush headlong into following him. In the rest of Mark’s Gospel we read about the many ways these disciples stumble and don’t get the larger message of what Jesus is trying to do. They are not instantly transformed into great leaders or sterling examples. Most of the rest of Mark’s Gospel recounts the ways they stumble and don’t get it. You wonder how this work Jesus has engaged them in – of ushering in God’s kingdom – will ever happen with this kind of help. We do know that the journey the disciples made with Jesus was not without its rough places, but I believe it was a time of learning and discernment. The greatest test was after Jesus’ death and they had to become disciples in a whole new way.

Most of us gather as a church because we’ve said that we want to follow Jesus – we want to be his disciples. We too need to continue learning what it means to follow for there are real demands on this journey. But I also believe what makes this journey possible is that he has promised to be with us every step of the way – right into the kingdom.