

FIRST LESSON: Jonah 3:1-5
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:14-20
January 24, 2021

“Near and Not Yet”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

God calls us all to follow God, to walk the path God created for us, to live the life God desires for us. Not everyone is listening. Some, like Jonah, hear God quite clearly and then run in the opposite direction. It took rather drastic action on God’s part to turn Jonah around, but ultimately, Jonah did what God wanted Jonah to do, even if he pouted quite a bit in the process. But the amazing thing is that God calls us in the first place! We’re the ones who turned away. Shouldn’t we be crawling back? And yet it is God who takes the initiative.

Last week we read from the gospel that was written the latest, the gospel of John. John’s gospel was very likely the product of an educated group of young scholars who sat at the elderly apostle’s feet, took his Aramaic words, and translated them into elegant Greek. The style is impeccable. We can even sense that in the English translation. It’s very polished and eloquent. This week’s reading is from the gospel of Mark, the earliest of the gospels. We know it is the earliest because both Matthew and Luke borrow from it. And whoever wrote Mark did not have that same level of education. The language is basic, and dare I say it, repetitive. Mark’s favorite phrase seems to have been “and immediately.” Everything in Mark happens “immediately.” Clearly, Mark did not have a thesaurus!

In addition to a basic and limited vocabulary, Mark also doesn’t give us any background information about the call of Simon and Andrew, James and John. It all just spontaneously happens. Jesus calls and they follow. But in Luke’s gospel we learn that they respond to the call after a miraculous catch of fish. And according to John’s gospel, some of the disciples heard John the Baptist say that Jesus was the lamb of God. Despite Mark’s bare outline account, these men would have known who Jesus was. They would have been part of the crowd listening to him teach. They showed up to hear John the Baptist. They showed up to listen to Jesus. It was evident that they were hungry for God, and Jesus paid close attention to people. He chose these ordinary men because they were actively seeking the kingdom of God.

Jesus chose twelve men to be his apostles, likely because the number twelve symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel. In a patriarchal culture like this, they had to be men, but Jesus also had many, many women as his disciples. And all of these people were ordinary. Some were barely literate or even illiterate. And they were not perfect either! They made mistakes. They misunderstood him. They hesitated. Peter even denied Jesus. Judas, of course, betrayed him.

What is most significant of all, however, is not something that any of us ever think of, and that is the fact that Jesus and the apostles were all northerners from the region of Galilee. I never paid much heed to this myself, but it's a HUGE part of the story. Israel is such a tiny country that to us the north-south difference does not seem like much of a distinction, but during these times when people rarely traveled more than 10 miles from their home regional differences were stark. There were three regions at the time, all governed separately by Herod the Great's surviving sons. Jerusalem was in the former southern kingdom of Judah, with Samaria in the middle and Galilee in the north. Jerusalem was the home of the educated elites. Aside from Roman enforcers it was predominately Jewish. But the northern region of Galilee was diverse. It had rural and isolated places like Nazareth as well as cities like Bethsaida and Capernaum that were cultural melting pots of Jewish, Greek and Roman inhabitants. Adding insult to injury the pagan cities of the Decapolis were on its doorstep, and the local ruler Herod Antipas had built the city of Tiberias as the new capital south of Capernaum right on top of a cemetery, which made it "unclean" under Jewish law.

While economically Galilee had a lot to offer in agriculture and fishing, culturally the southern Judeans despised them. The people from Galilee were viewed as unrefined and crude. They were religiously impure and suspect. They spoke a distinctive form of Aramaic and they dropped their consonants. I tried to think of what a good comparison today might be and came up with several options: London elites versus a group of fishermen from Fife in Scotland. Main Line blue bloods from the country club versus "Yo Adrian from South Philly." Washington DC elites versus a group of Cajuns from a place that I might call "New Orleans" but they would call "Nawlins," with Mobile Bay in Alabama filling in for the Sea of Galilee. The Galilean accent was ridiculed as ignorant. It would have immediately identified Jesus and his followers as "not one of us" by the Jerusalem elite. And of course, Jesus absolutely could not be the Messiah, because everyone knew the Messiah would come from the southern town of Bethlehem.

In addition to being Galilean, Jesus and his followers were not well off. Simon and Andrew and James and John would not have impressed anyone from a worldly point of view. We might as well call them Billy Bob, Little Joe, Chuck and Larry. They were a bunch of working-class guys. But they were working class guys who took God seriously. They did not follow the normal path for disciples. It would not have occurred to them to do so, *because they had to work!* They didn't have the leisure time to carefully and respectfully come to a rabbi and ask permission to be his disciple. They did not present their educational credentials and seek to prove themselves worthy of being mentored because they didn't have any such credentials. Instead, **Jesus called them.** God chose them. And the fact that they left everything and followed him would have been costly—not just to them personally—but to their families. Simon Peter was married. We don't know what arrangements were made to support his family, but something must have been done. The fact that Simon and Andrew were working together casting a net, shows that they ran a small family operation. James and John were able to leave their father with the

servants in the boat, indicating a much larger and prosperous business. But all of their family members were probably dismayed by the actions of their sons, brothers and husbands. Only much later after Jesus' death and resurrection do we learn indirectly that Simon Peter's wife traveled with him.

These apostles exercised great faith when they answered the call. When we think of them later standing up to the elite in Jerusalem what they did is absolutely astounding. But today it is not so simple to just extoll them for their faith. Today we are forced to ask, what is the difference between their faith and false belief? People can have faith in the wrong things. People believed in Hitler. And right now as I speak, thousands of ordinary people in our nation have been taken in by an elaborate conspiracy theory put forward by an anonymous figure called Q. These people truly believe that Donald Trump is a Messiah, that he has a secret plan to overthrow all of the elites in the world, which in case you didn't know are all Satan worshipping pedophiles. I personally have no doubt that Satan worshipping pedophiles do exist, but I do not believe that they are running the world as part of a Deep State. And right up to the last minute as these faithful followers of Q were watching the Inauguration, they were expecting mass arrests and executions of Democrats, a military coup, and Donald Trump to be back in power. It didn't happen. While many now realize they have been duped, others are still struggling to hold on to the house of cards they erected. Q-Anon, quite simply put, is a dangerous apocalyptic cult.

People have the ability to believe a lot of things that are not true. This is a serious defect of the human race. But faith in Jesus, faith in God, is not blind allegiance to a cause. It is relationship. Christian faith is based on a true living relationship with God. And scripture also makes clear that we will know the difference between godly faith and cult extremism by the fruit it bears. Followers of Q-Anon stormed the capital with other fanatics and wreaked havoc. Followers of Jesus storm the food banks and serve those in need.

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee he proclaimed the good news of God. The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" But like those members of Q-Anon seeking blood vengeance and the physical overturning of a world order, many of the Israelites of Jesus' day wanted a very physical and political kingdom. Ultimately that faction gained control, and the result was devastating. The political nation of Israel was destroyed and remained destroyed till the 20th century. Jesus came to bring us into a very different type of kingdom—a spiritual kingdom of love—a kingdom that comes about when we surrender our lives to God's kingship. No political solution ever really works in the end, because the nature of the problem is human sin. The founders of our nation knew this when they built in a system of checks and balances. What has preserved our democracy despite the onslaught is the fact that the writers of the Constitution knew we couldn't be trusted.

It is right to strive for justice. It is godly to do so. It is right to desire all to walk in truth and not be deceived by conspiracy theories and cults. It is right and necessary to pray for those in government. But let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can create utopia on earth, because we cannot. Only God can fully bring us God's kingdom. Only God can deal with the crux of the problem—the human heart. And only when Christ returns will things finally

and forever be put right and we will be able to live in true harmony with one another. Until then, the kingdom of God is near, and not yet. Amen

Jonah 3:1-5

3 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: **2** “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. **4** Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” **5** The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.