

**CALLED II; JONAH 3:1-5,10; MARK 1:14-20; JANUARY 25, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

In the message two weeks ago we talked about how God often calls the *least likely people* to important tasks of mission and ministry – not necessarily the most qualified or senior or seemingly deserving.

Today, the story from Jonah offers another view of how the business of being called to carry out God's purposes works.

The story from Jonah and Mark's account of Jesus calling the fishermen raises the stakes. In Jonah we see that not only does God call the least likely, God also calls those who unequivocally disqualify themselves for good and rational reasons for the work God is calling them to perform; Mark's account of Jesus calling the fishermen adds another factor – God is even capable of calling us out of and away from our families and professions to embark upon new and unknown paths of spiritual growth and development, ultimately to some service or ministry we could never have imagined.

These are stories for our time because they counter at one level every human impulse to favoritism and privilege and open up the possibility within and among the human family in all of its divergent incarnations that when it comes to God's ministry anything can happen at anytime and anyone can be called as God's agent.

Yet, at another level, the story from Jonah resonates deeply with the warring, terror-ridden world we live in. No less a biblical scholar than Walter Brueggemann compares the relationship between Israel and Assyria in which Nineveh was located, to the relationship between Jews and Nazi Germany.

The notion that God would call a Jew, Jonah, whose people had been oppressed and terrorized by the Assyrians to go into the heart of the greatest city of the day – Nineveh – and preach repentance seems like either theatre of the absurd or some twisted Stephen King plot. Yet, that is precisely what happens and not only that but Jonah is successful, Nineveh repents and God forgives.

The larger message here is more than simple forgiveness. The God we worship cannot be privatized in terms of individuals and specific communities; sometimes the Achilles heel of evangelical religion. God is God of the human family and nations. So Jonah's mission is anticipated by one of the most far-reaching visions in Isaiah:

"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship together. Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people. Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'"

In other words, Jonah's mission has geopolitical implications. The Old Testament is not concerned with God's commitment to Israel alone; rather God is defined by the forgiveness and rehabilitation of the entire human community including the nations.

The Jonah story introduces a moral dimension when it comes to national and international politics. Historically, God's name is invoked primarily to rally support for the war du jour. But if the theological dimension drops out of our international aims and perspectives then any credible moral dimension goes with it and the world becomes a place in which might makes right.

I fear we have trivialized the story of Jonah as a children's tale about a whale that comes along to take Jonah where God wants him to be. In reality this was a challenging story for the Israelites then, and a story that makes life more complicated in any century because it does not accept the lines we draw in the sand against our enemies – no matter how fierce and brutal they may be. The fact that the early church chose to include this little book in the Bible stands as one of the great marvels of church history.

This reading of Jonah adds urgency to our annual Understanding Islam series that begins next week in the Case Library. The topic this year is the phenomenon known as ISIS or ISIL—the Islamist political movement that claims to be a state and has cut a swath of terror across the Middle East. It is hard to imagine a more repulsive enemy. Our reading of Jonah also lends support to plans I am now making with two rabbis and a Presbyterian minister for a conversation between our four congregations around the concerns Presbyterians have for Israel's treatment of Palestinians, and the concerns Jews have that Presbyterian divestment strategies and educational curricula are isolating Israel and playing into a new anti-semitism that looks and feels eerily like the events that preceded Kristalnacht in Nazi Germany when Jews were required to wear stars of David and lost their rights and freedoms in a democratic society.

Other world hot spots like the Ukraine and Russia or Afghanistan and Pakistan or the current grid lock with Iran over its nuclear ambitions or North Korea's intransigent rogue behavior or fragile nations like Yemen that fall prey to terrorists, then collapse and become breeding grounds for more terrorist activity –

hot spots like these where it seems increasingly difficult to keep chaos at bay are also matters about which thinking Christians and people of faith need to be alert to and informed; not just to be responsible citizens but also as people of faith for a God who holds out hope even for our enemies and expects us to respond accordingly.

What I am saying is that the Book of Jonah does not let us off the hook by beefing up our military and defeating all threats to our freedoms and way of life. This book and the God who calls Jonah to preach, orders the whale to retrieve him, then deposits him in the midst of his mortal enemy calls us to remain open to the possibility that He is also at work to redeem those we love to hate – the Putins and Kim Jong-ils of the world, even those who are plotting new terrorist strikes. Because no matter what we say those who engage in such evil are nonetheless human beings and any human being is a child of God and every child of God who is lost breaks the heart of the One who made him.

And here is where the rubber meets the road in the business of being called: the story of Jonah instructs us not only to be open to the possibility that God is at work to redeem our worst enemies but that God may even enlist us in the process of their redemption and forgiveness.

You see this is what Jonah rebelled against. Not to mention took pains to save his life from since he was likely to be gobbled up by something worse than a whale – namely the hatred and torture of his brutal enemy.

But as I said – and I am using the story of Jonah as a metaphor not as an historical event – when it comes to God’s purposes anything can happen at anytime and anyone can be enlisted to make God’s wishes come to fruition.

That’s what being called meant for Jonah and that’s what people who use the Bible as their guide need to take into account and be prepared for.

Not to mention Jesus calling the fishermen today – in the Gospel of Mark’s Hemingwayesque staccato voice and economy of words – what happens is that they leave the profession their family has used to survive for generations; and they leave the elders in the boats to fend for themselves in a society where adult children were the de facto social security system that ensured care and respect for parents in old age.

When the fishermen leave their nets and their fathers, we are not talking about teenage rebellion. From the parents’ perspective we are talking about desertion of responsibility and duty. Yet, Jesus called them and some voice within each of them heard his invitation and did not hesitate to follow. They were not special people. The Gospel goes to great lengths to show how ordinary and even bumbling they were. Which I can only conclude means that you and I are endowed with a similar inner voice or compass or conscience that tells us when we are being called.

Being called can be hair-raising, dangerous business – at least as the Bible describes it today. But it is what it is.

When I encounter texts like we have this morning, I remember Frederick Buechner’s candid and startling line about himself – even on a good day, he said, he is a part-time Christian. And the rest of the time? The rest of the time Buechner says, “I am what Leon Bloy said, I am a pig.”

But I don’t want to leave you with that stark choice today: to be a part time Christian or a part time pig. Rather, just as with our enemies God is at work seeking to rehabilitate and forgive you and me for our shortcomings if not cowardice. And God wants nothing more than for us to trust Him and to go where he calls. I don’t know if that makes the choice any more palatable, but it is true that when we follow, though life may not be easier, it will be more abundant than we could ever imagine. You see, we’re each works in progress. One day at a time. And we’re getting there. That’s the good news! Amen.