

Epiphany Sermon Series: Encountering God in Worship; Sermon Title: Come and Follow

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20

Salem United Methodist Church; January 21, 2018

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During this Epiphany season we are exploring worship to be a time to encounter God as Creator, as the living Christ, and as the Holy Spirit. We come and worship to experience God, to connect with God, and to choose to follow God's call, or not.

When baby ducks are born, they will follow the first moving object. This is called imprinting. The ducklings follow the first object they see; usually this is the mother duck. But if the mother isn't around when the ducklings are born, they will imprint to any animal or a human that is near them, and follow. Imprinting is nature's way of protecting and providing for newborn ducklings. They ducklings that first object they see and follow indiscriminately. Humans are not born with the capability of imprinting. However, human babies do need adult humans to care for them and bond with them. Initially human babies have no choice but to trust the one who is responsible for their care. But babies grow into children who discover that they can choose who they will follow, sometimes they make choices to rebel against their parents. Humans are independent thinkers. We choose which leaders we will follow. We look them over. We listen to what they have to say. We evaluate them before we choose to follow them or not. There is at least one exception. Those who serve in the military usually do not have a choice. They must follow whoever is the leader. They obey their orders and follow, or else.

Jonah found himself in a similar situation. God gave him an order which God expected him to follow: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." And Jonah chose to disobey this order. Jonah chose not follow God, not answer this call on his life. Before we get too far into this story, there are a few things we need to know about Jonah. First, most scholars agree that the story of Jonah is not an historical event. It is folktale with features of a parable, a story that teaches. The ancient people as they listened would have recognized the story's satire with its exaggerated images and humor as well as understood its teaching. Second, Nineveh was an actual city, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, located on the Tigris River across from the current day city of Mosul in Iraq. Another fact is that in the eighth century the Assyrian Empire conquered Israel. So for the folktale to choose Nineveh as the city that is in need of repentance would be sending Jonah to the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, in 2018. This comparison helps us understand why Jonah chooses to run in the other direction rather than obey God's order.

Now to review the story: Jonah catches a ship that sails westward across the Mediterranean Sea which is the opposite direction from Nineveh. A storm comes up. While the sailors are trying to keep the ship from sinking Jonah is snoring in the belly of the ship. The sailors who are praying to their gods wake up Jonah so he could pray. Jonah announces that he worships the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. The sailors then believe that the storm is God's punishment for something Jonah has done and throw him overboard. Then a big fish swallows him. He is in the fish's belly for three days. However during his "time out" Jonah, the one God called to preach repentance, has a change of heart and repents. The fish vomits him out and he proceeds to Nineveh to preach a very short sermon, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" The entire city repented and God didn't destroy them. John Wesley wrote that Jonah had the fear of God in him, but not the love of God. He did not serve God from his heart, but from obligation. Jonah knew only the toils and not the joys of faith. So the moral of the story, children, is what? Prophetic sermons need only to be nine words for an entire city to turn to God? We are to obey God? We are to love our

enemies? God's grace and mercy is for everyone? Yes, yes, and yes. The ancient people who heard this story would have heard that they need to repent and turn back to God. This is the message of every one of the prophets: repent and turn back to God. And it is the exact same message that Jesus preaches in his first sermon in the Mark's Gospel.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This sermon is ten words longer than Jonah's, but still short. The next thing that Jesus does is something rabbis did not do. He found his own followers. Men who wanted to learn from a rabbi would choose a rabbi. But Jesus chooses his followers. He finds four young fishermen, hardworking men, who are being groomed to take over the family business, and calls them to follow him. The text is succinct. Jesus doesn't ask for a resume or references. Jesus doesn't do any background checks. He just says, "Follow me." What do these young men do? They do not confer with their families. They do not ask Jesus who he is and why they should follow him. All they know is that Jesus is going to have them "fish for people." Mark says that they immediately followed. There is no hesitation. This decision to follow Jesus changed the direction of their lives. Remember before Jesus called them, he preached, "Repent, and believe in the Good News." These words are acted out in the calling of the fishermen. Repent means to change directions. These young fishermen chose to stop doing what they always did and turned to believe that the kingdom of God, the good news is in this man, Jesus. Simon's, Andrew's, James', and John's belief isn't a consideration or a fleeting moment of thought. Their belief is the flinging of one's entire self: mind, body and soul into this new direction. These new followers of Jesus flung themselves in following Jesus the way they had flung the fishing nets into the sea. They immediately, without hesitation, had faith in Jesus and followed with total allegiance and fidelity to Jesus and Jesus only. They fully trusted Jesus and their lives were changed forever.

So how do these two stories connect us with our conversation about worship? Worship is an act of following. Those of us who use social media when we "follow" someone, a group, or an organization, we choose to click the "follow" icon which allows us to see everything that is posted on that site: opinions, pictures, videos, podcasts, and responses from other "followers." When we come here on Sunday mornings to worship we are choosing, too, to follow Jesus. No matter what is happening out there in the world or in our lives, in our worship we choose to change directions and focus on the Creator of the universe, to focus on the living Jesus the Christ who saves us from our own devices, from our self-centeredness, who gives us new life, a fulfilled life. We choose to be receptive to the Holy Spirit who offers to those who are in pain, hope, to those who are grieving, comfort; to those who are seeking, direction; to those who are doubting, faith; to those who are discouraged, courage to persevere. As we worship, we are choosing to follow Jesus. As we worship, we are changed by God's grace, sometimes in small increments and sometimes in large waves. This is the beauty of following Jesus.

Another beautiful aspect of following Jesus is that we all don't follow him the same way. Some may be like Jonah and are running as fast as we can away from Jesus. Some may be like the fishermen who by choosing to follow Jesus changed the entire direction of their lives. The rest of us are somewhere between Jonah and the fishermen in how we follow Jesus. We may even sway back and forth between the two. What kind of follower are you? Are you more like Jonah and would rather run away from following and serving Christ, or follow, but serve reluctantly? Or are you more like the fisherman who willingly followed and trusted Jesus? Or are you somewhere in between? Do you sway back and forth? Following Jesus is both a choice and a process. And another beautiful thing is that God never gives up in calling us to follow.

Coda: The one thing both the tale of Jonah and the real fishermen have in common. Once they followed, both brought people into a relationship with the Holy One. God is still calling for us to do the same.

Resources: John Wesley's Sermon 29: "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount."

