

## **Follow me**

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, January 21, 2024

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14;

1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1:14-20

The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler, Priest in Charge

St. Matthew's, Sunbury

*In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.*

*For Tina*

As you know, one of my favorite things to do with you is wonder how Holy Scripture reaches out to us today and teaches us who we are called to be in this world. When we take time to reflect on the intersection of our scripture narratives and our own life stories- both personal and communal ones- we draw closer to both God and each other and are better able to hear God calling us to our own work of building the kingdom here on earth. Speaking both as someone who longs to be faithful to the words of today's Collect- ***“Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation”-***

and as your spiritual leader, I care deeply about what this longing might look like in your own lives and how the stories of scripture are shaping your response when you hear God calling you.

There is such an undertone of urgency in today's stories, not only in our Gospel reading, which features Mark's well-known love for the word "immediately", but in all our readings. We sense it even in our Collect, that prayer we pray early on in our worship that "collects" us and our intentions for this time we will share together. We need God's grace, this prayer says, to answer readily when Jesus calls us- and this call will certainly involve our proclaiming the Good News to all people "so that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works." According to this prayer, ***God's glory will not be known if we do not proclaim it as we are called to do-*** our hearing the call and our willingness to follow are both necessary to building God's kingdom.

Jonah, of course, is well known for all the dramatic ways that he tries to evade God's call. In this story, we hear that this is the second time that the Word of the Lord came to him and called him to proclaim God's message of repentance to Nineveh and that this time he did respond. Jonah's proclamation of this message is described as the reason that the people believed in God and changed their ways, and God's response was to change God's mind and not destroy their city- there was no time to waste: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Our epistle also has such a sense of haste: "The appointed time has grown short", says the apostle Paul, adding to this conversation the knowledge that we are also called to hold lightly all the things that define us in our mortal lives. Our personal wealth, whether we are mourning or rejoicing, any titles we might hold dear are less important than our focus on the reign of God because: "The present form of this world is passing away." Again- *God's glory*

*will not be perceived if we do not proclaim it as we are called to do, if we focus on earthly things instead of heavenly ones.*

And as for Mark, the gospel that bears his name is full of energy and action and forward movement- hastening onwards as if there really is no time to waste. Jesus has been baptized and had his wilderness season and now John the Baptist has been arrested and something has shifted- it is **time** to turn from everything that does not truly matter and proclaim what really does: the nearness of the kingdom. Mark's story is alive with verbs that portray all this motion in its proper order: proclaim, repent, believe, follow, repeat. The "come and see" language we heard last week in John's Gospel has become "follow me"- and so we do not miss the point, Marks tells of how four fishermen do just that and they do it immediately.

There is a risk in this story that we could hear the word ‘immediately’ as applied to these new disciples and think that every time we do not instantly respond to an invitation from God that we are somehow not as obedient or faithful as they were. “Follow me”, Jesus says, and immediately they leave their nets and their boat and their father- abandon what is a necessary industry in that society and their family obligation- to follow Jesus. This story would make us believe that both the call and the response are always immediate- but we know better, know that responding to any kind of call is also the work of a lifetime.

Every time I think about this story, regardless of where I am in my own journey, I wonder- what if instead of taking this story literally, we hear this as a description of how their souls had been changed- of how a longing within them they may not have been able to fully name suddenly took on new life of its own? What if instead of

hearing in this story that we must immediately drop everything else in our life if we are to follow Jesus, it means that we pay attention to how something has shifted inside of us and we begin to figure out what that might be? What if we used this story to remind us that in every season of our lives, all our life's choices are opportunities for us to proclaim what following God looks like to the world around us- *that we are most truly proclaiming God's glory when we are faithful to how we hear God calling us in our own lives?*

On this particular Sunday, I love the urgency I feel pulling at me from these readings- imploring me to pay attention to their message. We have some really important work to do today as a community: we have our annual meeting, which invites us to both look back on the previous year and look ahead to the future- AND we need to say "See you soon!" as a particular season of being a long-time, every-Sunday music minister comes to a close

for our beloved Tina- although we know, because of her deep faithfulness and her love of praising God through music- that this way of being will never end for her.

Although our souls are tender as this celebration of her ministry brings back all kinds of memories and such deep gratitude for all we shared together, her story is a powerful witness to paying close attention to God calling us. She is hearing God's invitation for her to spend time with her husband and others traveling this beautiful world, seeing and appreciating other places in God's creation, while also looking forward to those times when she'll be back in town and able to make music with us again. This, beloveds, is exactly what listening to God's "Follow me" looks like- being attentive to the question "*What is it the season for?*"- and if not immediately, then prayerfully imagining what steps are needed to step out in faith. Far beyond Tina's gift of music, an extraordinarily beautiful gift from God in itself, her gift of living a God-centered life that allows for such holy listening is a

blessing beyond price. Sometimes we are called to do the faithful work of staying where we are and tending God's people in this place, and sometimes we are pulled onwards towards something new, and in every place we find ourselves our willingness to listen to the voice saying "Follow me", to be open to what God may be asking of us, is what matters.

I love a quote about today's gospel that I read this week: "***Jesus calls four fishermen from lives they knew by heart into lives they could not have imagined.***" This is us sometimes too, isn't it? There are so many times we cannot see the road ahead, when we would so much rather stay in the comfortable lives we know- but we cannot. The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom has come near. Proclaim the message you have heard as only you can do. The world beyond our doors stands in urgent need of everything we have to offer- especially the example of our own faithful lives and our own stories of hearing God



say: “Follow me.” There is no time to waste. We are the ones called to make God’s glorious and redemptive love known everywhere we go. **Amen.**