

## **“HEARING THE CALL: Second Chances”**

Jonah 1:1-6,11-17 and 2:10-3:5

Sunday, January 21, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Today we continue our series, “Hearing the Call” to help us recognize and respond to God’s call in our lives.

Since we are ordaining church officers in worship this morning, it’s a good day to talk about the idea of God calling us. But God’s call isn’t just for positions in the church. Each of us is called to faithful living out there in the world.

The Bible has many call narratives, with God calling ordinary people to discover new meaning, new direction, new hope, new purpose. But each of the narratives reflects some difficulty in hearing and heeding the call.

Last week we learned about the boy Samuel got called by God in the temple, but he didn’t realize it was God. He needed help to hear God. After some encouragement from Eli, Samuel responded, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

Two weeks ago, we heard about the first disciples, who were fishing. Jesus proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom and then called to them, “Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.” They left their nets and followed with good intentions, but the gospels tell us how often they said or did the wrong thing.

Today, you’ve already heard the call of Jonah, who was summoned by God to go to the big and wicked city of Nineveh.

While other people called by God have a hard time hearing or following the call, Jonah just flat out runs away, going the opposite direction, away from where God wanted him to go. And as you’ve heard, he ends up thrown into the sea.

So the reader is left wondering about two big questions: What will happen to the people of Nineveh, and what will happen to the disobedient prophet? At this point, things look bleak for both Jonah and Nineveh.

As you may know, Jonah ends up in the belly of a large fish, where he spends three days and three nights. He is prayerful in this dark place, and he undergoes a sort of resurrection.

The story continues with Jonah getting a second chance. Listen for God's word:

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*."

Jonah gets a second chance to respond to the call of God. This time he actually does what he is called to do. He goes to the great city of Nineveh where he preaches a rather uninspired sermon. His proclamation is only five words in Hebrew, and I get the feeling he said it with no enthusiasm, only wanting to get it over with. "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." It was probably like how I used to apologize to my brothers when my parents told me I had to or else be punished. "'I'm *very, very* sorry.' Was that good enough?"

Those of us who preach need to be careful about critiquing other sermons, but this is not a good sermon. No encouragement, no development, no engaging anecdotes, and worst of all no good news.

Incredibly this uninspired and brief sermon was tremendously effective, as the people of Nineveh and even the animals repent. In verse 10 we find out what happened to the Ninevites:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

All that from a five-word sermon. Maybe I'll try that some day. But not today.

So God is merciful to Jonah, giving him a second chance. And God is merciful to the Ninevites, giving them a second chance. But the story isn't over. In the final chapter, the part of the Jonah story that many people don't know, we see Jonah getting resentful after God shows mercy to Nineveh.

You might think seeing God being gracious and merciful would make Jonah happy, but instead he becomes spiteful and bitter. Basically, what he says is "I knew it God. I knew that you really weren't going to destroy the Ninevites. Those people deserve to be punished. But you're 'gracious and merciful' aren't you?"

Jonah is apparently grateful to get a second chance from God, but he's not so keen on the Ninevites getting one. It's if he has no concern or respect for them, as if they're from a country or region that might be considered a cesspool or a hellhole.

But God shows concern for the forgotten and dismissed people throughout the Bible. And as God's people, we are called to do the same, to care for the lost, the least, and the last.

The tragic irony of the story is that Jonah is the religious person. He's the one who knows the creedal affirmation of good news, that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but he doesn't really believe it. Those words haven't really taken root in him. Learning the words is one thing. Living them is another.

He got a second chance, a second call from God, but he still doesn't really get it. I wonder if God will give him another chance.

The story of Jonah is one of many which show us that God is patient and persistent in calling us and giving us second chances.

The question for us is what do we do with those second chances?

Ebenezer Scrooge is perhaps the best-known recipient of a second chance. He's a grumpy and greedy old man who gets the chance to look back on his life, to think about where his life is headed, and as a result, he changes direction.

Several years ago, I heard a story about second chances on National Public Radio, on Story Corps.

A New York City social worker by the name of Julio Diaz had an hour-long subway commute to the Bronx, every day, and on his way home, he often got off one stop early, to eat at his favorite diner. But one evening as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his dinner plans took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As the teen began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Diaz replied, "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner... and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome." Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, the waiters came by to say hello Diaz, who knew them all, since he was a regular. The youth said "You know everybody here. Do you own this place?"

"No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."

The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher."

"Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him.

"Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

Then the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

The teen "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet, Diaz said. "So, I gave him \$20... I figured maybe it would help him...." But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife.

Diaz concluded the story, "I figure, you know, if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right."

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89164759>)

I love this story.... I love the Christ-like witness of Mr. Diaz, how he helped this young man hear a new call for his life. And I wonder about how this second chance may have changed the young man. I wonder what he did after that night in the diner.

What about you?

Is God calling you? Is God giving you a second chance?

To find new direction and new purpose?

To slow down and focus?

To get involved and stand up for your convictions?

To slow down and be quiet?

To break a habit?

To mend a relationship?

To be more kind, generous, loving, or hopeful?

To be less busy, stressed, bitter, or worried?

The good news of the gospel is that God loves us and God loves the world, and God is gracious and merciful, continuing to call us to new life.

Speak Lord, your servants are listening. Amen.