

3 Epiphany – Year B – January 25, 2009
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
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Have you noticed how by some incredible coincidence telemarketers know the exact moment that your supper is ready, and choose that precise time to call? Ask any comedian and they'll tell you that the secret to good comedy is timing, well that and remembering the punch line. You will hear me say this a lot, because the experience of my life and I hope yours has shown it to be true. God's timing is always perfect. Yet today I'm going to add to that. God's timing *is* always perfect, but it isn't always convenient.

There are two great call stories in our readings for today: the first is from the book of Jonah, and the second is from the Gospel of Mark. In that delightful topsy-turvy way that God works in the world, the second story illustrates how God's timing is perfect, but the first story exemplifies humanity in action and just how inconvenient God's call can seem when it interrupts our lives, or asks us to do something we really don't want to do. The book of Jonah is a short and remarkable slice of Scripture. Let's take a quick review so we can get a sense of what Jonah is up to in this third chapter.

In chapter one God calls Jonah and tells him to go and prophesy against the Ninevites because of their wickedness. What is not immediately apparent from the text is that the Ninevites are powerful enemies of the Israelites. As strong as it might sound to say that Jonah hates the Ninevites, it is still an understatement. Jonah has embraced his identity as one of God's chosen with a kind of blinding and deafening arrogance. He stops at the gift of being a child of God, without embracing the call of all God's chosen people to be a light to the Gentiles, including the Ninevites. The upshot is that Jonah, despite being a prophet of God, really could care less about the Ninevites, and does so with such passion. When he gets the word from God, Jonah immediately goes the other way to try and flee from God's presence. This is where, you and I take a short break, look at each other knowingly and say, good luck with that plan!! Okay, back to Jonah. He joins a ship heading for Tarshish, and a major storm puts the ship and all aboard in serious peril. The sailors are asking every god they can think of why this calamity has happened and they finally cast lots to find out whom aboard is the problem. Of course, it turns out to be Jonah, and hence the common usage of that name for the one who brings bad luck. When confronted, Jonah admits it's all his fault and at his own request they throw him overboard. Such is the depth of Jonah's reluctance to speak the word of God to the Ninevites it actually seems that he would prefer to die, rather than go to Nineveh.

However, in chapter two, we are told that God is not going to let Jonah renege on his responsibility as a prophet of the Lord. We learn that God has sent a great fish to swallow Jonah and that he has several days inside the fish to contemplate his actions. At this point, Jonah is beginning to wise-up, and he uses the time to pray. God answers the prayer by telling the fish to puke up its passenger onto dry land. So here we are at chapter three. "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.'" It turns out that Nineveh is big -- a three day walk across. Still kicking his heels a little, Jonah walks for one day into the city, and proclaims, "Forty days! more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" You might actually have thought by his message that Jonah would have enjoyed telling the Ninevites the bad news. There isn't a single word of hope there. There isn't a single word of what the people of Nineveh should do in response to the warning. But there is the gift of time. Even though Jonah, our reluctant prophet, has only traveled one third of the way in response to God, the people of Nineveh believe God, proclaim a fast, and put on sackcloth. In other words, the people of Nineveh respond to God by repenting, and in turn, God shows them His great mercy. Let's just say, that as far as Jonah is concerned, not only was the call to go to Nineveh inconvenient, but so was the result. To coin a phrase, it is a rather inconvenient truth for Jonah that everyone who responds to God's call for

repentance will receive God's mercy. I'm not going to name names, because the names are going to pop right into your thoughts any second now, but I will ask the question. Would it shock you to know that God cares as much about all those people we think of as adversaries of God, or even our personal enemies, as much as God cares about you and me as lovers of God?

We've heard about Jonah, now let's flip the coin over, and look at the responses of three very different men -- Simon, Andrew and James -- to God's perfect timing. It tells you how shallow I am, when my first response to reading the Gospel story was something like, no way would those guys have just walked away from their livelihoods and families to follow Jesus like that. Where did my thoughts first jump? Economic security and family. So what is it that Simon, Andrew and James saw and heard in the presence of Jesus that was so compelling, they didn't even think twice about obeying the call to follow? Jesus was undoubtedly a very charismatic fisher of people. Yet, as tempting as it is to rationalize, that will not lead us to truth. There was nothing superficial about Simon, Andrew and James. They left their nets because somehow they knew that the command to follow Jesus was God's best and most perfect path for their lives, yours and mine. At some point in your life and mine, Jesus called each of us by name to believe in the good news. Whenever that was, by the grace of God, you and I accepted the gift of faith, and believe Jesus is our Lord and Savior. We picked up the phone and answered the call. Even when it's not convenient, lifting the receiver is practically irresistible. Jonah does just as much. Jonah hears the word of God, and believes. Yet you, me, and Jonah all know that picking up the receiver is just the beginning. Jesus doesn't stop with His proclamation to "believe in the good news," his next words are "follow me."

In English and in Greek that's a command. In first century Palestine, and in twenty-first century Lakeside it's still a command of God. Our circumstances have changed. For you and I, it doesn't literally mean drop your nets and come with me. However, simply because Jesus is no longer literally a physical presence in our midst, we are still being called to become *disciples*. Jonah found that part particularly difficult. And I think you and I do too. Accepting the gift of faith by God's grace is simple compared to living into that promise. As Jonah discovered, discipleship is costly, and quite often inconvenient to the way we would rather live our lives. Our culture consistently tells us that words like surrender, submission and discipline do not have good connotations. This cultural indoctrination may be at the root of ours, as much as Jonah's own resistance to becoming disciples.

God is calling, and the benefits of discipleship are frankly amazing: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Our response reflects how far we are willing to go in our walk with the Lord. Here are some of the ways in which we can allow God to transform our hearts and minds through the power of the Holy Spirit and continue growing in our faith and our discipleship. The first step is an intentional desire to invite God's presence into your heart and your life. It involves listening to God to discern God's will, worshipping God at all times, and especially as part of a community of faith. Praying to God as Jesus taught us. Serving as Jesus served, in humility and by putting the needs of others above self. Studying the Word of God, and whenever you fall into sin, repent, and return to God. Simplify your life so that your faith and trust in God is increasingly invested in the hope of God's promise in Christ Jesus, and less and less in the stuff of the world. As Richard Foster says, "superficiality is the curse of our age... The desperate need today is not for [more] intelligent people,... but for deep people." Joyfully accepting the call to grow and deepen our relationships with God and one another through the disciplines of discipleship is our gift to God and each other. It is also another way to practice God's graciousness.

Amen.