

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

Bread, Bath & Beyond

January 21, 2018

Title: Beyond the Horizon

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

You've probably heard the phrase, "Life is what happens while we are making other plans" or "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans".¹ I think that our scripture readings today are wonderful illustrations of these.

Because our Bible has four Gospels, the stories of Jesus calling his disciples vary from Gospel to Gospel. Mark's gospel is the shortest, the oldest, and tends to have fewer details than the others. Mark also has a sense of urgency in his gospel. In just 16 short chapters, he uses the word "immediately" about 40 times.

Today we heard in Mark's gospel, Simon (who would later be called Peter) and his brother Andrew were working –fishing, as they did most days. In the middle of casting their net, Jesus showed up and said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." As Mark likes to point out, "Immediately" they left their nets and followed him.

A little further down the road, they come across James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were busy mending their nets. Once again, Jesus calls to them and once again "immediately" they left their father and followed Jesus.

Jesus was always calling ordinary people, people like you and me; people who are busy living life. In the midst of the ordinary, Jesus comes to us and calls us to use the skills we have developed, the gifts we have been given and to use them in new and exciting ways for God. We can't tell from Mark's gospel whether Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John had

ever met Jesus before. We can't tell if they knew anything about him. In John's gospel Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist and was present when Jesus was baptized. John tells us that Andrew went and found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus.

It's probably not important exactly how it happened, but what is important is that Andrew, Simon, James, and John all left behind their fishing vocation to follow Jesus and to become people who fished for people. Soon they would be doing things that they had never imagined themselves doing. Soon they would be moving beyond the horizon of their current lives into new places.

Yet into this new life, they would take with them the skills that they had learned and that had served them well as fishermen. They knew how to be patient when the fish weren't active. They knew that sometimes they had to pull up their nets and go to other places. They knew to pay attention to the weather. They knew that they needed to take care of their nets and their equipment if they expected to be successful in their fishing endeavors. These skills of being observant, patient, understanding their context and being adaptable would be valuable to them as they learned how to help bring people to Jesus.

Still, they had likely never fished further than the Sea of Galilee. A fishing boat is not something that you pick up and easily move from one body of water to another. They had not fished in the Mediterranean Sea and likely hadn't thought about doing so. But then Jesus showed up and invited them to look their horizons, to look beyond what they knew, to cast a wider net, to go with him to places they hadn't considered and to do things that they couldn't imagine.

And yet, there was something that made them willing and even eager to follow Jesus. There was something that made them ready to leave behind everything that they had known, to place their trust in Jesus and to embark on a new voyage, a new adventure.

In the story of Jonah, on the other hand, Jonah knew what was being asked of him and he was not willing to be a participant in God's plan. The story of Jonah is one of those books in the Bible that causes great debate among some people. Did it really happen? Could a man really survive in the belly of a large fish or mammal for three days?

This might be where it becomes important for us to remember that the Bible contains several different types of literature. We have history about kings and conquests told from a certain perspective. We have prophets speaking to the people, identifying behavior that offended God, and calling them to change their ways. There is a book of songs; a book of proverbs, four books telling us about Jesus, a book about the actions of the early church, several letters to churches, books that are about the end times, and then we have Jonah and a few others that are less easy to define.

One of the commentators I read this week noted that Jonah was likely written during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, during a time of religious revival in Jerusalem in the 400 BC's. In the Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah cover the period from the fall of Babylon in 539 BC to the second half of the 5th century BC and they tell about the efforts to create a purified Jewish community and to get people to worship the God of Israel again. Part of this revival involved strict laws that included a ban on intermarriage. All non-Jewish wives and children were banished, sent

away. By the way, if you ever question whether the Bible is relevant for today, just read the Bible next to your favorite news source.

This commentator noted that two great novellas were written to protest this treatment. One was the book of Ruth that pointed out that if this kind of law had been enforced in earlier days then King David would never have been born. The other, was Jonah. He says, and I tend to agree, that the purpose of Jonah is to emphasize God's love for foreigners.

Like the story of Ruth, the story of Jonah is set in an earlier time in the capital of Israel's main enemy, Assyria. Assyria had conquered Israel in 721BC about 250 years earlier. So, we can understand Jonah's reluctance and refusal to go to Nineveh. Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed, just as Ezra wanted all non-Jews driven out of Judah. But God cared about Nineveh. The point was not how wicked they were, but that they too could repent and turn to God.

The message is simple enough! Outsiders were more open to God than the insiders. The Book of Jonah asked the reformers to examine their own situation and ask about what they were doing to helpless women and children. They were reminded that God cares for the outsider, even when they did not.ⁱⁱ

But here, Jonah was being asked to go beyond his horizon, beyond anything he could have imagined. As we already heard, Jonah had previously run away from Nineveh – going in the opposite direction, getting thrown overboard during a vicious storm and then spending three days in the belly of a large fish. Then Jonah finally went to Nineveh and in the next chapter he became very angry when the Ninevites repented, even though they don't even know Yahweh, the God of Israel. Because they repented, God decided not to destroy them.

Jonah argued with God, “Isn’t this what I said would happen? I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” In the words of someone else, these would have been words of thanksgiving and praise, but for Jonah they were an accusation. He was so angry that he even asked God to let him die because he didn’t want to live if the Ninevites weren’t going to get what he thought they deserved. The lives of more than 120,000 did not mean anything to Jonah. This is one of those examples of the one who knows the Lord acting as if he does not, and the ones who don’t know the Lord, acting as if they do.

One of the favorite jokes of the Bible is the unexpected faithfulness of the outsider, the other, the enemy. Ruth and the Good Samaritan are notable examples of non-believers who lived faithfully doing what should be expected of those who claim to worship God. In the story of Jonah, the reformers and the nation of Israel were being warned that their “narrow and bitter attitude is a rejection of the God of their fathers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These scriptures are about people who were called to go beyond their horizon into experiences that were very different from their everyday lives. Although Jonah did not want to respond, God was able to use him when he finally did act, even though his heart was definitely not in it. Andrew, Simon, James and John willingly followed Jesus and through them and others the world has been changed.

Where might God be calling you, and me, today to leave behind our limitations, to turn away from the things that we think hold us back? Where might God be calling us to cast our nets to a greater purpose? Where is God calling us to go beyond our horizon and cast a wider net?

For most, that call is likely to leave you physically right where you are. God **may** be calling you to go half-way around the world or to change your job as you follow, but for most of us, the call is to go deeper right where we are. We are being called to take one step that brings us closer to God, whatever that next one step may be. We are being called to take one step that helps us be more faithful to God's call in our lives.

Maybe the horizon we are being called to move beyond, involves monitoring our daily lives to be sure that we are acting like those who know the Lord rather than like those who do not. Maybe we are being called to examine our lives to see what is holding us back from following God completely. For each of us that step may be different and I invite each of us to spend some time talking with God and listening to what that may be.

In calling the Galilean fisherman to discipleship, Jesus is not just calling them to add another task to their already busy lives, but rather Jesus is calling them to a new way of being.

The writer for this week's Upper Room Disciplines reflecting upon our Gospel wrote, "Jesus meets the ... men where they are, both physically and vocationally. He comes to their setting. He does not seek out government officials or people who will elevate his status. He approaches fishermen who have spent their entire adult lives perfecting skills on the water. Nothing about their lifestyle is easy or predictable; perhaps that makes them ready for a life of discipleship. Jesus issues the call to discipleship not as a blind following him but as a choice to use experiences, skills, and culture for God's glory.

"This is good news for us because God calls us to follow and learn in our varied vocations. Jesus calls us to transform our world by living in justice and compassion, using the skills we have developed and the

language we know. Only then can we meet people where they are. Our experiences, stories, and culture shape us so that when we face a new challenge or calling, we can step forward with confidence – immediately.”^{iv}

“Is there something you need to leave behind today in order to follow Jesus more closely? Perhaps this means a change of habit, or some decluttering”, or something known only to you. “Hear God say these words afresh to you today ‘Follow me’. How do you want to respond?”^v

Let us pray:

“Life-giving God, may we use everything we are to follow you. Thank you for the experiences that have shaped us; be with us as we grow in your grace. Amen.”^{vi}

ⁱ The first is often attributed to John Lennon, but appears to be borrowed from someone in Reader’s Digest in 1957. The second was popularized by Woody Allen but it’s original source is attributed to an old Yiddish proverb.

ⁱⁱ Wingeier, Douglas E, editor Keeping Holy Time Year B Abingdon Press, 2002, p.71

ⁱⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year B. Theological Commentary on Jonah.

^{iv} Trevathan, Adrienne Sparrow, Upper Room Disciplines, 2018 Friday, Jan 19. P.34

^v Pray as you Go, Meditation for Weekend Jan 20-21

^{vi} URD