

EPIPHANY 3B

Jonah 3, Mark 1, 1 Corinthians 7

“I Did It My Way”

Whenever I read these passages about the calling of the disciples, I am always impressed by how quickly Andrew, Simon, James and John drop everything in order to follow Jesus.

In the Gospel of Mark, particularly in the first half, everything is “*immediately*”.

The new disciples

immediately dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

What would prompt you to drop everything?

What would compel you to give up your livelihood and security,

like James and John, give up your family and your future?

It is a troubling question.

What if you do drop everything –
job, family ties, security and all you have attached yourself to
– and you are wrong?

What if you choose wrong?

What if the person you follow misleads you?

Back when I was selling financial products, it was imperative to discover what the potential client's *risk tolerance* was.

There were questionnaires they would fill out and questions you could ask and then you sort of added it all up to see whether the client had a high tolerance for risk, which meant you could invest in more volatile products,

or a low tolerance for risk, which meant investing in things like bonds and money market accounts.

The key to discovering risk tolerance in the financial field, though, was not easy.

Most people say one thing and often mean another.

Someone who is younger and has family concerns may have a very conservative desire to maintain some security in their investments.

But they have many years before them and can actually sustain a considerable amount of swing in values.

But a young person who has created a lot of wealth quickly by taking huge risks may actually have little tolerance for wavering values.

So people can say one thing but really be capable of handling quite the opposite.

Or not.

Jesus doesn't really care about the risks of the transaction he is calling us toward, however.

Last week, we talked about how expectations get in the way of listening and following, particularly with Nathanael.

This week, we can see how those expectations play out with the disciples and Jonah.

The disciples, at least today, are able to act immediately because I think they have a high tolerance for risk and change.

They are the kinds of people who rush toward the unexpected, or to put it another way,

Jesus defied their expectations and opened up an entirely new way of being to them.

Andrew, Simon, James and John don't do

a cost-benefit analysis,

come up with a plan of change and

then implement a transition structure into their new life.

Instead, they are like the fish they catch –

one day they are living one life,

doing the normal things of that life

and then, immediately as Mark would say,

they are 'caught up' into an entirely new life.

It is like going from breathing water to breathing air.

Keep that image in your mind as you contemplate on your own what it means we are to do as “*fishers of people*”.

Somehow, Jesus overcomes the four disciples expectations with the simple words,

“*Follow me.*”

Everything from here on out for those four men will be unexpected –

the miracles, the teaching, the community and relationships,
the witnessing of Jesus' death and empty tomb

– all of it is unpredictable in any expected life.

Then we have Jonah, who seems exactly the opposite of the disciples.

Jonah is called to do great things but has a very low tolerance for risk.

In our reading today, we see Jonah just after he has been

vomited up onto the shores of Ninevah by a big fish

which carried him in the belly for three days

after sailors threw Jonah overboard

while Jonah tried to escape his calling from God

by going all the way to Tarshish.

Tarshish is the furthest west you can get in Southern Europe before you are in the Atlantic Ocean.

Ninevah is the opposite direction at the furthest reaches of the Middle East.

Jonah is running away from his expectations.

Jonah has a lot of expectations.

Ninevah is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrians are a troubling people.

The Assyrians had a compulsion to destroy entire civilizations and enjoyed doing so. Their soldiers were terrifying and fierce and brutal. They liked torture and even invented some of the worst forms in history.

So Jonah has the expectation he is on a suicide mission, commissioned by God.

He has the expectation that Ninevah is beyond the ability to convert to anything other than more evil behavior.

Jonah has the expectation he can get away from God and God's call to him by going to Tarshish.

And now, defying again his own expectations, he is outside Ninevah to fulfill his charge to proclaim the word of the Lord.

Even though Jonah has all these expectations about God and others, he has a problem.

Every time he opens his mouth, people convert.

The sailors on his boat to Tarshish all convert when Jonah explains his situation.

God listens to Jonah when he bewails his situation in the fish.

And now, just a day's walk into Ninevah,

the entire city –

120,000 people and even the cattle –

convert on the spot and repent of their evil ways, turning to God.

Nothing goes Jonah's way.

He is really mad about it.

All of Chapter 4 is about Jonah whining and yelling on the hillside.

He is mad that God is merciful and saves the horrific Ninevites, not understanding that

God has also mercifully saved Jonah from a horrible death.

He is mad God has made him look like a false prophet,

since God didn't destroy the city as God said,

not understanding that the work of a prophet is as much about turning people to God as it is warning people of God's judgment.

He is mad God gave him a little plant for shade and then took it away.

I love Jonah.

He is the unwilling participant in God's greater plan, just like most of us.

He is easy to identify with

and he is easy to use as an example of what not to do in our own calling from God.

I am not sure, myself, often, how not to be like Jonah.

Which, if you read this as it is intended,

doesn't look a whole lot different from

a petulant child who has been asked to clean his bedroom.

To stop there would be a mistake for us, however.
Given our position in the world as Americans,
I think it is important we also try to identify with the Ninevites.
As a culture and a country,
how far from the desires of God have we gotten ourselves?
The problem with empires and superpowers is that,
when they look out upon the world,
all they see are more of themselves.
They expect the rest of the world to look like them.
For us, a country is either like America
or it is not like America and should be more like us.
We breathe the water of superpower and all its expectations
and it is all we know.
We are like the fish Andrew, Simon, James and John catch.

So I ask the question I asked at the beginning again:

*What would be so compelling for you, for us, that we would
leave everything and enter into a new life?*

Like the Ninevites,
*what would it take for us to willingly consent to breathing the
air of God instead of breathing what is known –*

the water of power,

the water of wealth,

the water of success,

the water of what we know and what we expect?

We can only answer these questions if we are willing to acknowledge
and confront our own expectations.

There is much talk these days about the decline of the church and the
erasure of faith from the culture.

In many church conversations,
there is a nostalgia for the days of old when this many kids did
these things
and such and such a group always was involved in this
ministry
and remember when it was so much better than right now?

This is **expectation talk**.

It is an attempt to project what has been
onto what is and what shall be.

The thing is, though, wherever God, Christ and the Holy Spirit show
up, everything changes in unexpected ways, in new ways:

Isa 43:19 Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you
not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the
desert.

2Cor 4:16 we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting
away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

Eph 4:24 put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true
righteousness and holiness.

Rev 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first
heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no
more.

Jesus begins his ministry in the Gospel of Mark by proclaiming,

“The time is fulfilled! The kingdom of God has drawn near.”

To rephrase what Jesus is saying here:

the past is gone.

*The unexpected ways of God are now near to you,
accessible to you.*

*Turn away from expected outcomes
and believe that I am bringing you into new things,
which will require you to be a part of the
unexpected presence of God through me, Jesus Christ.*

Paul talks to us about opening ourselves to unexpected ways of being Christ followers in our reading today.

Again, I will paraphrase what Paul is saying:

Your expectations from the past are no longer relevant.

*Recognize all the things we are attached to in this worldly existence –
relationships, feelings, things, our useful skills in the world –
are transitory, subject to the losses of time.*

I want you to be free from anxiety.

Unspoken in these verses is what Paul is pointing to, namely the unexpected, new and surprising future of a life with God.

Our culture is in the process of what Dr. David Lose, my advisor at Luther Seminary, calls the movement from

the age of duty to the age of discretion.

The age of duty is the time

when we made our decisions about our lives according to what we are supposed to do.

The age of discretion is the time

when we make our decisions, in the midst of vast options and choices, according to what best serves my personal growth and relationships.

Think about this regarding church and church life.

Part of the reason church was so great when many of you were younger, when the halls were filled with 350 kids and every church event had 2500 people in attendance, was because you were supposed to be here.

Your parents were here,
your friends were here,
your pastor told you to be here –
and isn't church what everyone does anyway on Sunday morning?

It was an age of duty and obligations.

Now, there are choices and options.

Maybe it is Saturday night Tai Chi or Yoga.
Maybe it is a sporting event for the kids.
Maybe it is 'family time',

an effect of making time a commodity which is now doled out like a paycheck.

Or maybe it is precisely because you feel obligated to go to church that you stay home.

Now it is an age of discretion.

The question of *where is everybody in church?*

is difficult for us to answer because, quite simply, we are here.

But I want to make the difference clear to you.

We are here because we choose to be here,
not because we feel it is our duty to be here.

Is one better than the other?

I don't know,

but what I do know is that

based on our readings today

it is our expectations

that put us on a fast boat to Tarshish,

the opposite direction of God's calling upon us.

To put it another way,

how can we know the new things God is doing in the world unless we are willing to be out in the world?

It is our expectations which keep us from recognizing how God is changing people even outside the walls of church.

To put it another way,

how can we see God's presence in the world if we are not willing to proclaim God in the world, as the disciples and Jonah do?

It is our expectations that keep us on the hillside mourning outcomes we have no control over.

To put it another way,

how can we let God have the power to change the world and let go of what we wish God would do?

A pastor I read recently spoke of conversations in his church around why people don't come to church anymore.

He writes that he is beginning to think it is the wrong question.

The question, this pastor says, is

why should they come to church?

It is a good question because it confronts our expectations.

We live in the confluence of different expectations.

There are the expectations in the church of the world, and the world has expectations of us (mostly negative these days).

There are expectations in the church of one another who call themselves Christian,

and we who are here have expectations of our church.

There are expectations in the church of their pastors,
and pastors have expectations of their congregations.

Into the middle of those competing and conflicting and sometimes
agreeing expectations,

Jesus comes.

He walks along the shores of our familiar places of work and
wandering.

He proclaims a strange message.

We hear it and wonder,

What time is fulfilled?

When is the time, now or the future?

What does this man mean?

What was I expecting?

We hear the Good News and think,

How has the kingdom of God drawn near?

Where is that?

What is the Kingdom of God?

What am I supposed to believe?

The answer is relatively straight-forward.

We are called to believe in the person of Jesus Christ.

We are called to follow him.

“Follow me”, he says

to us,

to our lives,

to our churches,

to our relationships and

to each one of us.

The call is unexpected.

The outcome of the call is unexpected.

The way forward as we follow Jesus is unexpected.

I will ask you again,

*What is so compelling that you would leave everything for
God?*

What is your risk tolerance toward the unexpected outcomes of your
decision?

Do we trust God enough to make an unexpected decision to follow
God more closely?

The thing about the unexpected is that it is also unpredictable.

We cannot know what the future will look like,

but we can know, as Jonah knows so well,

that such a future is

in the hands of a merciful God

who is slow to anger and

full of steadfast love for each one of us. AMEN.