

**"Follow Me"**  
**by Rev. Frances Savill**  
**January 21, 2024**

**Jonah 3:1-5,10**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

Last week I heard a brilliant sermon here in this Sanctuary. Yes, I was not preaching, Cathy was. And she spoke about God calling. There is no doubt in my mind that God is calling every single one of us by name.

The only question is, what is God calling us to do?

First, and most basically the answer is that God is calling you to follow Jesus. The word of Jesus to everyone of us is "follow me."

Then the answer gets more complicated, because what it looks like for me to follow Jesus is not the same as what it looks like for you to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is worked out in the particulars of your life: your work, your family, your life situation, your personality, your bank account, and your gifts.

But what we do all have in common is that it looks like a cross, and it takes us to places and situations, we wouldn't choose on our own. God's intent is to bring us not the good life, or an easy life, or a comfortable life, but something that Jesus called abundant life.

This morning we have two different stories of people called by God to follow.

Jonah was a prophet of God. He spoke God's word to God's people. But one day God sent Jonah not to his own people but to his enemies. God asked Jonah to go where he didn't want to go.

Notice a couple things... first, Jonah had answered God's call to be a prophet, and speak God's word, Jonah was God's man, until he wasn't. In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us that if we want to be His disciples, we have to take up our cross **daily** and follow Him. God doesn't have a retirement plan, there isn't a time when we can just stop following Jesus.

God spoke to Jonah and this time Jonah decided to go in the opposite direction from God's plan. He got on a boat and headed to Tarshish. And we know what happens, a big storm comes up - which is all Jonah's fault, and to save themselves the crew on the boat had to throw Jonah into the ocean. And Jonah was then swallowed by a large fish.

If you try to run away from God and God's call, be careful and keep looking over your shoulder because a large fish might swallow you at any moment. By chapter 3 and the passage we read today, Jonah has been spit up by the large fish and he found himself on the shores of Ninevah.

God's word comes to Jonah again, just like it did at the beginning of the story: "Go to the great city of Ninevah and proclaim my message to them." Jonah's heart still wasn't in the mission he'd been given, but he reluctantly went and started speaking God's word.

"40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown."

Ninevah is a big city. It would take three days to walk across the city. Jonah goes a day's journey and then starts to speak. He's not in the heart of the city. He's not near the courts of the King and the seat of power. He's preaching on the outskirts and his message isn't particularly inspiring or hopeful.

"40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown."

But the people hear the message as the word of God and they respond. Or that we would respond to God's message the way the evil Ninevites did. Somehow the king of Ninevah heard the message and not only does he respond, but he calls all the people of the city to respond. They repent. They turn from their wickedness and their evil ways and humble themselves before God. Sackcloth and ashes for everyone from the greatest to the least.

God has mercy on the Ninevites. God spared them just as Jonah was afraid God would. Jonah knew of God's mercy, Jonah prayed for that mercy for himself when he was in the belly of the fish.

Everywhere in the story of Jonah we have God showing mercy. God showed mercy to his people sending Jonah to them to speak his word.

God showed mercy to the sailors during the storm, and He saved them all.  
God showed mercy to Jonah not letting him drown in the ocean.  
God showed mercy to Jonah rescuing him from the belly of the fish.  
And then God showed mercy to the people of Ninevah not destroying them.  
God is the God of mercy and the God of life.

When we turn to the gospels, we have Jesus calling the fishermen.  
I expect they thought Jesus would be a zealot, a revolutionary, and they were going to turn the tables on the Romans, defeat their enemies.  
I imagine they were looking for someone like John the Baptist that would bring everyone to their knees in repentance.

But again, Jesus was sent by the God of mercy. Jesus' love is extended to the outcasts, the sinners, to Roman leaders and leaders of the Synagogue.  
The cry on the cross is for our forgiveness. There is no one beyond the mercy and love of God.

Jesus came to bring life. God sent Jonah with a word that brought new life.  
Notice that the Word is effective. Jesus calls the disciples, and they leave everything and follow Him.

Jonah cried out to the city in judgment and all the people were convicted and heard it as the Word of God. They stopped their evil ways that was destroying them, and the nations around them, they responded to God, the Living God, who could bring new life even to a nation like Ninevah.

The disciples heard Jesus' invitation and immediately they were up and following Him. When Jesus asked his disciples if they wanted to stop following him, they answered, "where else can we go Lord, you have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

The disciples saw it in their own lives, and they saw it every day as they followed Jesus; new life, the merciful love of God that brought new life, new hope to everyone who would receive it.

God's word is merciful and gracious, even when it is a word of judgment. God's intent for Ninevah was to bring them life – not death.

The disciples, after leaving everything, began an adventure of a lifetime. It took them to people and places they wouldn't have gone, it stretched them, and taught them. The heights and depths of God's love, shown in Jesus was revealed to them. We are invited to follow in their shoes.

Jonah was a much more reluctant disciple. He spoke God's life giving, effective word, and he saved his enemies.

We are left not knowing what happened to Jonah. Did he every really understand God's mercy and love that was shown first to him, and then to his enemies? Did God send him on another adventure? Did Jonah accept the new life and mercy that God was offering? We don't know.

But I am sure that God's mercy continued to follow Jonah, and new life was offered again and again. We know the love and mercy, and the call of God in our lives, and we have experienced new life in Jesus' name.

And daily we choose how we will respond. Sometimes reluctantly, sometimes immediately, sometimes not understanding, and sometimes we are sent where we'd rather not go.

But however, we go, we carry in us the effective word of God, a word that brings life. A word, even when it is a hard word, or a word of judgment, it is a word that brings mercy and love and it meant to bring life to the full.

And our following that path of Jesus, daily as best we can, following Jesus and Jesus' way, brings **us** life eternal now, what Jesus called life abundant or life to the full.

**Let us pray:** God your mercy and love pursue us. You are gracious and merciful. And you call us to follow you, to go where you go, even when it is difficult, and ask us to make your mercy and grace known in this world so everyone might know life, abundant life, life that flows on into eternity. Show us how to follow You Jesus today, in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.