

Sermon Title: What Have You Done for Me Lately?

January 22, 2006

Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI

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Next Sunday is our Annual meeting Sunday. I know that even as I mention it, a sense of eager anticipation grips your heart. Sure, the Superbowl's the next week, and if you had cable you could have watched the Miss America pageant yesterday night...but the *Annual Meeting!* What could possibly be more exciting?

Kidding aside, the Session, and the Sabbatical Task Force, and truth be told, as much as anything your Pastor, have been keying on this coming Sunday as an opportunity to engage more people in the conversation that has been sort of brewing for the past year, as we've moved to, through, and beyond my time of sabbatical. What that means is that next week's meeting is going to take a little different tack from what we might be used to, and I suppose I should say off the top, it will require a certain level of trust to make it work.

What you *won't* get next week are detailed spoken reports on the work of the various ministry teams, or a step-by-step walk through of our financial reports for last year, or the budget for next year. A quick course in Presbyterian polity would remind us that except for things relating to pastoral terms of call, budgets and financial reports are primarily the business of the Session, and *reported* to the congregation for their information. So, this year the *business* part of this business meeting will be kept to its bare minimum—receiving the written reports, approving minutes of past meetings, adopting the Session's recommendations regarding changes in the terms of call for Pastor Steve and myself.

But our sincere hope for the bulk of our time together is that we'll have an opportunity to digest the core questions that the Session, Deacons and Task Force hear emerging out of the sabbatical, and then, *most* importantly, a chance to sort through these questions in smaller groups—eight to ten of us, with elders and deacons helping the conversation to stay on track. Of course we don't think we can get it all talked out in the 2 hours that we'll have together next Sunday, but we're hoping that we'll all have a chance to grow in our awareness, and then sort of stake our claim to the questions or conversations *we'd* like to be a part of in the course of the next year.

So, fair warning, and a humble but sincere request that you *trust* those whom you've called and installed as your leaders, as we wade just a little bit deeper into this wonderful question: *who is God calling us to be, as the church of Jesus Christ in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

End of commercial—and apology! But lest you think I've completely forgotten, it really *is* our lectionary readings for this morning that spurred me to begin this morning by pointing to next week. Last week, Pastor Steve got us all to thinking about this notion of *Call* that lies close to the core of our faith as Reformed Christians, and challenged us to think about why we do (and I suppose *don't*) accept the calls we sense from God.

The questions he raised resonated with me, particularly because of so much of the reading that I had the opportunity to do while I was away, and that I've tried to continue to sandwich in to my

life as I've re-entered the congregation's flow. But it's the two stories that the lectionary offered to us this morning force the question to the center once more, as we're directed to two quintessential "call" stories: one from Hebrew scripture, and the other from the beginning of Jesus' own ministry.

We all know all about Jonah and the whale. We know it well enough that just these few verses we shared create a cipher for the whole story—though the details might be a little fuzzy, and merged with our childhood recollections of Geppetto and Pinocchio. We remember that Jonah was minding his own business when God singles him out to go to Nineveh, the big bad city in the heart of the evil Babylonian empire, to proclaim God's judgment. And we remember that Jonah understandably decides to run as fast as he can in the opposite direction. God, being God, catches up with him on board a ship headed to Tarshish, literally the other end of the world.

And so (here's where we might get confused with Pinocchio) poor Jonah's thrown overboard and swallowed up by a whale (or a "great fish" if you kept paying attention long enough in Sunday School to absorb some Higher Criticism.) Saved from the belly of the fish, we joined the story this morning, as Jonah is called by God a *second* time to the same task, and Jonah's no fool. As badly as things might go for him in Nineveh, he knows it gets worse if he might try something else.

The editors of our lectionary then cut to the chase, and we learn that God's plan actually *works*—the people of Nineveh repent, and are saved from destruction because Jonah did as he was asked. End of story—well, except for that little scene of Jonah harumpfung in the desert because he was sort of looking forward to a toasted Nineveh, but that's a lectionary reading for another day. The moral of the story is that God calls, and when people respond, the world really can change!

From Mark, on the other hand, we get another cipher of a very familiar story: Jesus' call of the disciples. Again, it's so familiar that I'm not sure we take much time to wonder at how extraordinary a scene it is. Simon and Andrew are going about their business when a total stranger walks by, says, "Follow me!" and they drop everything, leaving their poor father Zebedee bewildered in the boat. And because they dropped their nets, their lives, and *ours* will never be the same.

What's the theme? Well, I've pretty much given it away already, haven't I? Central to this Christian faith that we share is the dynamic of "call" and "response." That's the simple answer. Sometimes, God calls people to do things, and when God does, it's best if they obey. But that simple answer, I've been thinking as I've read and thought my way into, and through, and alongside the questions that have emerged from our sabbatical journey, can mask a multitude of sins.

Sure, we can think, sometimes God calls people like Jonah and Simon and Andrew. But then we can do a quick inventory of our lives' experiences, and I'm guessing that for the most part, we can conclude that we're off the hook. I've never heard a voice from heaven, Jesus has never stopped by my desk and asked me to drop what I was doing to run an errand for him. I might, to recall last week's call story, have had some pretty strange dreams in the middle of the night, but there's always been an Eli of some sort or another who's been able to assure me in the morning

that it was only a dream! Sure, God calls, but (huge sigh!) so far it's not been *me*! Under the guise of research I've tuned in to the new television show, *The Book of Daniel*, and I think it offers pretty clear evidence of just how bad it can get if you start with the premise that Jesus appears from time to time sprawled out on your couch, or in the passenger seat while you're running and errand. It makes for less than third-rate entertainment, maybe, but really, truly, it's *fiction*, not fact.

And from the premise, there's an even more unfortunate second step. God hasn't called me here—at least I've not heard any of the bells and whistles—so I must be here in much the same way that I'm just about everywhere else in my life: because I need to pick up something that I'd like before I go home. I sense it in how easily we convolute the central question we're hoping will guide on conversations next week, so that we don't have to talk about what *God* is calling us to be, and can wonder, instead, what *I* would like from the church—what I need, or desire, what *I* think we should do or be in order to be faithful, or helpful, or more successful.

And somehow, unlike God's call to Jonah, these are questions into which we can jump with both feet. *I'd* like the church to be a place of welcome, and friendship for me. I'd like it's worship to be entertaining, and fresh, and easy to digest. I need for the Sunday School to provide good moral direction for my children, and comforting reinforcement for me. And *please* don't infringe on political issues, especially if what you're going to say will disturb what I *already* think. In short, when we allow ourselves to slip down the slope of thinking that God's call is reserved for people like Jonah, or Simon or Andrew, and that I am somehow exempt, we'll end up looking a whole lot more like Nineveh than like God's chosen, and what passes for religion will end up being little more than the Wizard's flimsy curtain that any persistent Toto can pull back, exposing the *man* behind the booming voice on the screen.

No, I am convinced that Jonah and Simon and Andrew are *not* placed in the biblical narrative so that we can all heave a huge sigh and conclude that *we're* not the ones God's calling. I think—this at least is my bet for this morning—that they're there to remind us that it is *only* through ordinary folk that God's word *ever* finds its way into this world. You can't have forgotten already that when, in the fullness of time, God chose to fully enter this world, the form this God took was not a mysterious rising tide, or a "Superstar", but one baby that, for the rest of the world to see, looked pretty much like every other baby.

What makes Jonah, and Simon, and Andrew exceptional is not their call, but that at the end of the day, they responded. They used their ordinary gifts in extraordinary ways. They stepped *way* outside their comfort zones, agreeing to follow where God led instead of begging God to follow *them*. Each was led to a place of profound discomfort—because that's the way God grows God's children! Not so they can all hold hands and "feel the spirit" but so that the Spirit can move through them to literally re-shape a world that's fallen, and battered, and broken.

The *danger* of our lectionary for this morning lies in the temptation to think that it's *not* about us—that God hasn't, and doesn't, and *won't* call folk like you and me. But if you listen carefully, I wonder if the *truth* of the lectionary is just the opposite: that it is *only* folk like you and me that God has *ever* called. Not so that we can show our lottery ticket and claim our prize;

not so that we can leave the world behind and enter some eternal spa called “heaven”, but because God loves this world so much that at the end of the day, God cannot be without it.

It may not be through the belly of a fish, or by Jesus showing up on your front porch with a fishing pole in hand, but God *is* calling *us*—each of us, and *all* of us. God’s calling, not to save ourselves, but to be the hands, and feet, the voices, and arms and strength by which the *world* might know of God’s saving, and redeeming, and life-giving love—not just *given* to us, but *entrusted* to us, as *our* call, if we *dare* to follow.

Let us pray.