

“THE STORY OF A MODERN DISCIPLE”

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

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For over thirty years Church of the Saviour has been on the radio, first on WCLV fm and more recently also on WHKW am. Most of you are aware that no matter how long the service lasts in the chapel, the Great Hall, or the sanctuary, on the radio it takes 28 minutes, no more, no less! Our radio ministry team, currently Daran Kiefer and Pat Tamburro, has the tedious task of editing our weekly worship hour to just 28 minutes.

When I was serving as pastor in Youngstown, one of the radio stations invited the area pastors to share devotional messages on the radio. We were given not 28 minutes, but 27 seconds to share a message of faith. Now if you think about it, most commercials these days are about that length, so it is possible to communicate a message in 27 seconds. But it takes a great deal of effort to be that articulate. I always say it is more work to prepare a short sermon than a long one, because to prepare a short message, you have to be focused and succinct. I used to spend hours preparing those 27 second devotionals. Then I would go to the studio and record a week of messages at a time. Less than two and a half minutes of air time for a whole week!

I am not a person who is very conversant with the social media, as many of you know. I rarely am on Facebook. I have never gotten involved with Twitter. But I am aware that when you send a message via Twitter, you have only a limited amount of space in which to write. Whatever you want to say has to be said in 140 characters or less. How do you express yourself in 140 characters? Some of us need more characters than that to clear our throats!

Do you realize? Jesus' opening words in Mark's Gospel, the Gospel we are focusing on during this year of our Lord, 2012, contain only 98 characters! If Jesus would have had Twitter available to him, he could have tweeted his message with 42 characters to spare. Here is his message: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”* 98 characters! If you have a red letter edition of the Bible, these are the first red letters you see in the book of Mark. They are the first words Jesus speaks. But these 98 characters changed people's lives! These 98 characters changed the world! Was Jesus an effective communicator or what? We have 28 minutes a week to share the Gospel on the radio. I had 27 seconds to share my message of faith on the radio station in Youngstown. But Jesus' words take only about five seconds to share, and they changed the course of human history!

We heard two fish stories from the Bible this morning. They are not about the one that got away, but about people that God encountered and convinced to follow him. I have always been intrigued by the call of the disciples. I can visualize Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee

and seeing the fishermen in their boats casting their nets and pulling in a catch. Fishing has a great deal of appeal for many of us. But if you did it for a living, eventually it would get pretty monotonous, don't you think? Can you imagine Simon and Andrew throwing out their nets, dragging them in, taking the fish to the market, negotiating a fair price, putting the nets away and going home, only to come back to the same routine the next day and the day after that and the day after that, on sunny days, on rainy days, in hot weather, in cold weather and everything in between. Can you imagine fishing, every day?

So Jesus encounters these two and says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Intriguing. I wonder what he means by that. This is a profitable business. We make enough to support our families. Life as a fisherman is not really that bad. But that's modern-day Charlie talking. The Bible says that **immediately** they left their nets and followed Jesus. Immediately.

The plot thickens. Now Jesus sees James and John, also fishermen. They must have had a rough night, for they are mending their nets. Had they gotten caught in a storm? Probably. Did I mention that fishing could be a dangerous business; that from time to time folks drowned in the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm? Jesus also calls them, and they leave not only their nets and their boat. The Bible tells us they leave their father in the boat and follow Jesus. Immediately. Immediately.

If you are getting the idea that everybody in the Bible followed without the slightest hesitation when they heard God's call, I need to remind you about Jonah. One of the commentators calls Jonah "the world's most reluctant prophet." Jonah hears God's call loud and clear: "Go preach to the people of Nineveh." But did he go? No, he got on a boat and headed in exactly the opposite direction!

Most all of us know the story of Jonah, how a storm came up, how Jonah confessed that he had not followed God's call, and how the other sailors threw him off the boat into the sea. Let's not get caught up in the details of, "Did a fish really swallow Jonah?" and "Could he have survived in the belly of a fish for three days?" The hardest part of the story to believe for the original audience was that God cared about the people of Nineveh, that God's love and God's forgiveness extended even to them. Have things changed? Do you know where Nineveh is? Right in the middle of modern day Iraq! How many want to sign up for a preaching mission in Iraq? After the terrorist attacks of 2001, didn't some of us have a problem offering forgiveness? Don't some of us still have difficulty comprehending the concept of the unbounded love and mercy of God?

Just this week, I spent some time with a person who is having some health problems. He has asked God to forgive him of his sins, but he asked me, considering what he has done in his life, will God forgive him? Can he be forgiven for some of the things he has done? He wants to know. When I was in seminary one of our professors preached a sermon in chapel that I will never forget. In that sermon he said that sometimes those of us who preach God's message of forgiveness week after week to others have a hard time accepting God's grace for ourselves. We need to hear these words of forgiveness, the words of grace in our lives, too. And it was as if he was preaching right to me. Can I be forgiven? My friends, the answer from the Bible is "yes." God is ready and willing to forgive any of us. God is ready and willing to forgive all of us.

And so Jonah, the world's most reluctant prophet, becomes Jonah, the world's most successful evangelist. For the Bible tells us that when Jonah preached, everyone repented and decided to follow God's direction for their lives. It has been said that through the miracle of modern technology, Billy Graham has preached to more people than anyone else in the history of

Christianity. Billy Graham has had a tremendous influence on millions of people. But not even Billy Graham can make the claim that in even one of his many crusades, everyone repented and decided to let God take charge of their lives. But the Bible tells us that's what happened in Nineveh, in the middle of Iraq. When Jonah came to town, and did what God told him to do, everyone in the whole city repented and gave their lives to God. And that says to me that when the word of God is communicated effectively, people listen and people respond. People are dying to hear good news, and we have the best news anyone can ever hear, that God's unbounded love and grace extends even to you, even to me. It doesn't get better than that!

God called the fishermen: Simon, Andrew, James and John, and they responded to God's call immediately. God called Jonah, and he hesitated. That's putting it mildly! When I was a junior in high school, the United Methodist Women selected me as one of two kids from our church to go to Reach Out, a summer camp that is still being held every year at Lakeside. The UMW would pay our entire way to camp. I figured, why not? The camp had formerly been known as "Girls School," for teen-age girls only. This was the first year it would be co-ed. Apparently not all the churches got the memo about it not being just for girls anymore, because when we got to camp there were 105 girls and 19 boys! That wasn't camp; it was heaven! I have never been so popular before or since in my whole life! Needless to say, I had a wonderful week! But on the last night of camp we were told that we would have a communion service, and after that we would have to be quiet until breakfast the next morning. Suddenly my evening plans were changed. Instead of taking a walk with a girl to get an ice cream cone, I was told I needed to be by myself and reflect upon the message of the Gospel that we had been hearing that week at camp. That night along the lake, on a beautiful candlelit path, I felt the call of God upon my life to be a pastor. It was as clear as day.

Like Jonah, I was reluctant. I didn't head in the opposite direction. Well, I kind of did, because I enrolled in psychology classes, became a psych major and decided to become a psychologist. But the call persisted. I enrolled in seminary, planning to become a pastoral counselor. Then I was sent to a wonderful church in suburban Boston to be what they called a "Student Intern." I discovered that I loved the work of ministry and that people responded to my ministry. Some of those pastoral relationships have continued to this day. The kids that were in my youth group now have kids of their own, and we still stay in touch. Eventually I realized what God was trying to tell me, and I was ordained, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I wish I could tell you that I have never had second thoughts or wondered whether my ministry was making any difference in anyone's life. I wish I could tell you that every day has been wonderful, that I've never faltered in my prayer life or never had a doubt go through my mind. But I can't tell you any of those things. What I can tell you is that the journey has been worth it, and that I have found fulfillment in following God's call, fulfillment beyond my wildest dreams.

You see, every morning I feel like God is calling me again. And every morning I have to answer. Some days I am more reluctant than others. There are still days when I want to quit and to take a different job --- any job! But then I hear God's call again and see God's hand at work again, and I know that God wants me to be doing what I am doing at this time and in this place, and that's the best feeling in the world.

What keeps me going in ministry, someone asked recently? That question is easy to answer. It is seeing people grow and change. When I see youth go to Chrysalis and come back with a radiance about them, when I see older people lose a loved one and weather the storm, when I see families make life decisions based on their faith rather than on popularity or

economics, when I see babies born and people join the church, when I see people take leadership roles who were once on the outside --- then I am energized and I am inspired, and I know that God is at work in this place and in every place. And I thank God that God has called me to be part of what God is doing each and every day.

Did you notice? In these fish stories from the Bible that we read this morning, everybody changes direction. Jonah goes to Iraq; Simon, Andrew, James and John leave their nets and follow Jesus; Nineveh repents and the disciples change jobs and take on a new career: fishing for people. God calls us to change direction, too. God may be calling you to be a pastor. God may be calling you to be a doctor or a public servant or a teacher. Parenting is a Christian vocation. So is caring for the elderly. God may not be calling you to change jobs or change careers, but God is calling each of us to put him first in our lives and to follow where he leads. Of that I am very sure.

The way may not be easy. Jesus does not promise that if we follow him we will end up on easy street. Quite the opposite. Jesus tells us that he will be crucified, and if we follow him we can expect a similar fate. The road is dangerous and unpredictable. But if we follow Jesus, we will find fulfillment beyond our wildest imagination. That is the message of the Gospel. That is the message of 98 characters that changed and continues to change the world: *“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the good news.”*

The time is now. Say “yes” to Jesus this morning. **Give God a chance** in your life. **Give God a chance** today.

Prayer: Dear God, just as your call came to the disciples of old, and to Jonah, so we believe that you are calling us to follow you today. May we say “yes,” not only with our lips, but with our lives. Help us to follow where you lead, and all might know of your boundless love. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.