

RESPONDING TO GOD'S NUDGES

JONAH 3:1-5 & 10; Mark 1: 14-20

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I would have loved to preach on the passage from mark today: how intriguing that Jesus just said “come follow me” and without so much as a by-your-leave, the brothers Andrew and Simon take off with this itinerant preacher who is passing by. Maybe that is a sermon to come. Today we pay attention to the story of Jonah because this scripture just would not leave me alone this week.

Let us pray:

O, God, when you speak so insistently, help us to listen and respond to those nudges. And this morning may my words and all of our meditations be tuned in to you. Amen.

Now in today's scripture Jonah is spot on his task to address the Ninevites with a message of repentance. But it was not always so.

Do you recall how Jonah was sent to Nineveh but refused to go? Got on a ship that was battered about so by a storm that the sailors were convinced someone had displeased God? Jonah was forced to admit that he had brought this on them by running away. At wit's end, they at last cast him into the sea where the story goes that he was swallowed by a big fish, an allegory intended for us to ponder.

The sea was a terrifying mystery to the ancient Israelites. They believed it to be the home of sea monsters. To be thrown into the sea and swallowed by a creature would be one of the worst fates imaginable. And, indeed, Jonah describes that he has been in *sheol*, in the underworld, enduring life in the belly of a fish. In chapter two he says, “When my endurance was weakening, I remembered the Lord.....that which I have promised I will pay.”

So when the Lord commands him again to go to Nineveh, he hops right to it. Well, perhaps that is not the best description as it was a very long way to Nineveh. One reference suggested it was about 500 miles. One wonders what sort of conversation he was having with

himself as he made that trek. I imagine it might have been something like: “Did I understand God right? Am I really being called to go here, to do this?” In fact, he was being asked to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, a city known as a center of fertility cult worship and also for its cruelty to the victims of warfare. Jonah’s attitude that led to his initially fleeing on the ship seemed to be that the Ninevites were beneath him, not worth his time and effort. Seems that God had a different idea about that.

So Jonah gives us both sides of the coin. We have Jonah who refused to listen to God’s nudges: Go to my people in Nineveh.... (“Oh, no, God, those people don’t deserve your love or redemption.”).... And the Jonah willing to take on what must have been rather daunting, the journey to Nineveh and the message he had to bring. And what a powerful message he must have delivered! I don’t just mean the words he used. Scripture reports a mere one liner: “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” I mean the conviction with which he spoke, the empowerment of God’s spirit that apparently gave force and credibility to his message--- perhaps very much like the remarkable impact of Jesus’s call to Simon and Andrew.

Like Simon and Andrew, the people of Nineveh are reported to have responded immediately: “The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.” I love this verse. It speaks to a unity of purpose, to a wholehearted response, the kind of response that is so indicative of God’s spirit within a community.

This message is so very relevant. Often we struggle to respond to God’s spirit. Even after this very powerful experience of the Ninevites responding to Jonah’s preaching repentance, Jonah reverts to his previous stance. “God saw what they were doing---that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it. But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. “

So we don’t always respond to God’s nudges as well as the Ninevites and sometimes we behave as poorly as Jonah did when he ran away in the beginning and later when he got angry. But we do have the opportunity both as individuals and as the community of Pilgrim Church to listen for and respond to those things towards which God is encouraging us.....especially now.....especially now as we anticipate welcoming the next leader into our fellowship.

I feel somewhat like a John-the-Baptist type, championing the one who is to come after me, who will seek to help us understand where we feel led to go from here, to shape our vision of the future. I think of one example of a vision from our history.

When I came to pilgrim, Betty Soward shopped monthly to stock the food pantry. If someone showed up asking for food, Dianne stopped whatever she was doing, ran downstairs to the food pantry and put together a sack of groceries. Now we distribute food monthly to individuals and families representing 400-500 people. A devoted group of Pilgrim volunteers helps. We also utilize youth from Notre Dame to unload boxes from the food bank and to assist on the days when food pantry is open. This ministry has enhanced our connections to Notre Dame and to the Glenwood neighborhood. Most of you probably don't know that MOC (Mission and Outreach Committee) now serves as a block captain for the Glenwood Association, regularly delivering communications to folks in this area. Our vision grew.

However we envision ourselves, it seems imperative that we see our seats in the pews on Sundays as a resting place where we renew ourselves to go back out into our community. I think of Tom Rose, who is here because he met some Pilgrims protesting war on Frazier Avenue on a bitterly cold day. I think of the fellow behind me on the march on MLK Day this past week who said "what time is your church service? I want to come." He had seen the back of my Pilgrim t-shirt---the ones Terry had encouraged us to wear---with the message about a caring, inclusive community. I think of our youth, who were on that march. I think of the plans these youth have in the works to help with the opening of a new facility called 'Welcome Home' where homeless individuals facing end of life can receive hospice care.

Do you hear what I am saying? The fellowship we have here is wonderful.....but the work of following Jesus is outside our walls. When we respond to God's nudges, we live out our identity as God's people.

I don't mean that it is always immediately and absolutely clear when God is seeking to get through to us. My own experience has been that striking clarity only comes after I have wandered in some wilderness sometimes for months and months without apparent end in sight. I share one experience, the one that brought me to Pilgrim.

Early in my "Pilgrim journey" I felt the need to meet with Johnny Mingus to introduce myself. Sometime soon after that I wrote this about our meeting:

"Much of that conversation I don't recall. However, the opening and the closing of that chat are indelibly printed on my memory. In the midst of a seemingly very ordinary exchange, Johnny asked me "Do you always go by Kathleen?" I explained that I had grown up going by Kathy but had taken on Kathleen as an adult. He then asked me, "So what do you want to be called?" I was momentarily puzzled as I thought I had just conveyed to call me Kathleen. But when I opened my mouth to say Kathleen, my vocal chords were struck as soundless as those

of the men who accompanied Saul on the Damascus road.....recovering somewhat, I heard myself saying, with a certainty which surprised me, 'Kate. I want to be called Kate.'

"Throughout the bible names carry great meaning and changing or modifying names has tremendous significance," I continued writing of my experience. "Abram was ninety-nine when the lord made a covenant with him and changed his name to Abraham, meaning the father of a multitude. Jacob encounters God, the covenant is continued and he is renamed Israel. Saul is confronted on the Damascus road and becomes Paul. While my life won't go down with theirs in history, I recognize that I am encountering God and to 'change my name' somehow 'names the change' I am experiencing.

"As our talk came to a close, I began to inform Johnny of all the reasons I was likely to be an infrequent visitor: I was attending other churches as well. I wanted to take my time while I made a decision. I was uncertain.

"He asked a purely 'Johnny' question: 'Why don't you hang out with us while you decide?' with blinding clarity I saw myself as 'wee little Zacchaeus' clinging to the limbs of the tree I had climbed, distancing myself from the crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Jesus and his buddies, longing to somehow make a connection. And up through the branches float words like the strains of a tender melody: 'Why don't you come down from that tree and hang out with us?'"

And then I wrote these words: "So Pilgrim Church may list its address as 400 Glenwood Drive. But I know better. Pilgrim Church is on the Damascus road."

I never went anywhere other than Pilgrim after that conversation. I responded to the nudge I got. And along the way my vision grew and developed into a path to ministry.

This is my prayer for pilgrim: that we, like the Ninevites who in one accord declared themselves God's people, will open ourselves to be receptive to God's nudges. Those nudges can take us in directions we never imagined, just as I never imagined standing in this pulpit in any kind of capacity as pastor when I responded to Johnny's query, "Why don't you hang out with us while you decide?"

Amen.