

Mark 1:14-20, (Jonah 3:1-5,10), Epiphany 3, 1-24-2020,

"An Important Call"

Have you ever noticed how often we don't answer a ringing telephone these days? Unless we're expecting a call, when we hear that phone ring our first reaction is usually to pick it up, check the caller ID to see who's calling and decide if we want to talk to them or not. Even if it's not our own phone that's ringing it's hard to resist the temptation to look at it when it rings.

We were once taught that when the phone rings, we should answer it. We were conditioned to answer the call just in case it might be an important message for us. Sometimes we might resist for a while, but it's hard to avoid checking a call when it comes.

Our lessons this morning tell us about five men who answered a different kind of call: one reluctantly, and four without question. In our First Reading we heard about Jonah, who eventually answered God's call, mostly because God finally gave him no other choice. In the Gospel reading from Mark, we hear a different story, however. Simon, Andrew, James, and John left everything to follow Jesus simply because he called them to "Follow me."

Most of us are probably familiar with the story of Jonah spending three days in the belly of a whale before the whale finally spewed him out on the shore. It's one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible and one we're taught from childhood because it really captures a child's imagination. But how many of us remember, or were even taught, why Jonah ended up in the great fish's belly in the first place?

Jonah got a free ride in the belly of that whale because he was trying to not answer a call from God to go to Nineveh and warn the people to repent or be destroyed. God called Jonah with this important message for the Ninevites and Jonah hung up on him. Jonah tried to ignore God's call and run away from Nineveh, but God wouldn't stop calling. Finally, God had Jonah thrown into the sea where the whale picked him up and deposited him in the exact place God had told him to go in the first place.

When Jonah proclaimed God's word of repentance to the Ninevites they received it so well that God had

mercy on them and changed his mind about overthrowing the city. When Jonah finally gave in and answered God's call the results were fantastic. Of course, Jonah wasn't happy about that either, but that's another story. Whenever you have a little time read the short but fascinating book of Jonah in the Old Testament. It really has a lot to say to us about answering God's call and doing God's will, even when it goes against our own.

I think there are a lot of us today who hear God's call to serve him in some way or another, and we try not to answer. Sometimes we might not like the idea of what God wants us to do so, like Jonah, we try to run away.

Sometimes, though, it might be more that we are afraid of what God is calling us to do so we try to hide, hoping the divine phone will stop ringing. Believe me folks, when God calls, he won't stop until he gets an answer, even if he has to make a whale of an impression on you to get a response.

Sometimes others can sense God's call to us and can be the ones through whom God works to get us to go where God wants us. For me it wasn't a whale but my wife that recognized that God was calling me to proclaim his Word through ordained ministry. She didn't exactly swallow me up and spit me out on Seminary Ridge, but she did, and still does, guide me and carry me along on this journey with her love and support. If you are reluctant to answer God's call for your life, don't be surprised if God uses your family and friends to help get the message across.

In our Gospel lesson, we hear about a very different response to God's call than the one Jonah offered. As Jesus is beginning his public ministry, he is preaching the same message of repentance that Jonah proclaimed to the Ninevites and that John preached to the people of Judea.

Jesus proclaims the good news that God's kingdom has come near and that through repentance and faith the people of Galilee could be a part of that kingdom.

Jesus seems to realize, though, that he'll need help in proclaiming the gospel to the world, so he calls the first of his disciples to follow him in his mission and ministry. He finds Simon, Andrew, James, and John

going about their daily chores; fishing and mending nets. They were doing the same things they did every day to make a living. In the midst doing of their jobs, Jesus calls them, and they drop everything to follow him. We aren't told if they knew anything about Jesus or not; they simply answered the call and did what they somehow knew was right.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus called simple people going about their daily work to be his disciples rather than calling religious leaders or high-ranking officials? Jesus not only called them out of their daily work, but told them he would use their experience to fulfill God's call to them. Jesus didn't say, "I will make you great preachers," he didn't promise, "I will teach you how to save the world," and he didn't say they would become something they were not.

Jesus told these fishermen he would make them "fish for people." God would use the gifts they had been using in their daily lives to fulfill God's call to them to follow Jesus in their new lives.

The fact that Mark gives us little detail about these fisher-men who are about to become fishers OF men gives us the opportunity to see how God might call people like you and me in much the same way. We might be called to follow Jesus and learn to use our gifts and talents to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in our lives today.

Jesus might say to the farmer, "Follow me and I will show you how to plant, raise and nurture people so that they grow into Christian brothers and sisters of outstanding faith." God might call the teacher to "Follow me and I will make you a teacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the good news of God's grace."

The construction worker might hear God's call to be a builder of faith for those who are wandering along life's journey without knowing the shelter of the loving Heavenly Father who has mansions prepared for those who believe in him. Jesus might be calling the nurse to follow him so that he can make her a healer of the spirit by administering the right doses of God's call to repentance along with God's promise of unconditional love and mercy for all God's children.

Jesus calls us to follow him, God asks us to proclaim the message of the kingdom of heaven, and we have the gifts and abilities to answer that call, whether we know it or not.

God uses fishermen to fish, doctors to heal, secretaries to support, and musicians to play in whatever way suits God's purpose if we answer the call to follow Jesus and let him make us what he wants us to be. Jesus calls all Christians to follow him in everything they do every day of their lives, and he uses us to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to those who haven't yet heard the call.

Jesus calls us through his Word, the Holy Scriptures. Jesus calls us through our friends and families who recognize our gifts and convince us we can use them for the sake of the Gospel. God calls us through the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church." And God will keep calling even if it takes extreme measures to get an answer, like it did with Jonah.

We're conditioned to at least check the phone when it rings, we should be even more anxious to answer God's call when it comes. Sometimes the call comes as plain as a phone call, like when your wife says, "I think you need to quit your job and go to the seminary." It might be as shocking as a call in the middle of the night that gets your immediate attention.

Sometimes the call is more like a phone ringing off in the distance that takes some searching to find it and discern it, but we can't simply ignore it. I know there are people listening to this who have heard God's call, or at least suspected they were being called, but haven't yet responded.

Maybe they're not sure of what they hear, maybe they don't like what they hear, or maybe they just don't know what to do about what they hear but the ringing of God's call won't just go away.

I would bet there are also some who are recognizing God's call to someone else but haven't said anything to that person about it. Give them the message! Maybe they're like Jonah and trying to get away and they need you to be the great fish that turns them in the direction God wants them to go. God's word comes to us in many and various ways. Jesus calls us from wherever we are and whatever we are doing to follow him.

Answer the call, don't try to ignore it, it might be the most important message you ever get. Amen.