

This morning's Scripture brings us two of Christianity's greatest call stories: of the Hebrew prophet Jonah, and of Jesus's first apostles. Epic as these stories are, though, they are also two of the shortest readings in our lectionary, giving us just snippets of the two events. So, it's worth spending a little time exploring the context.

In our Old Testament reading, we meet Jonah as God comes to him the *second* time, saying "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." And Jonah sets out to Nineveh, traveling four days until he arrives in the city, crying out "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And hearing Jonah, the people of Nineveh believe God, and repent, turning from their evil ways.

But before that, the *first time* God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh—about a 500-mile journey—he thinks, nope, this is *way* too hard, not me—and heads in the opposite direction. He flees across the ocean to get away from the Lord, but God reigns down a mighty storm that threatens to capsize the ship. The sailors on board offload cargo, hoping it might save them. But still the hurricane rages on, threatening certain destruction. Ultimately, Jonah sacrifices himself, suggesting that if they throw him into the sea, God will quiet the storm. And so, they do. And at some point, a whale swallows Jonah, and he spends three days and nights in the creature's belly.

We can only imagine how this experience felt for Jonah: the shiver of his body as it plunges into the churning waters, the flaying about as the waves surround him, the sheer terror seizing his limbs as the creature approaches, its massive jaws opening wide. The desperation, as the darkness of its belly engulfs him. And then, the peace that overcomes Jonah when he prays, his gasps for fresh air as the creature

vomits him onto dry land, his determination as he finally sets off to Ninevah to follow God's instructions.

Then Mark's Gospel brings us Jesus, who's just spent 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism. Scripture does not reveal what Jesus learned during this time of testing that informs his actions going forward. But we do know he goes to Galilee and calls Simon, Andrew, James and John, ordinary Jewish fishermen out making a day's wages—to give up everything for him. And these men drop their nets and immediately follow Jesus.

We can only imagine how this all unfolded. When Jesus approaches the men, they may have been worrying about how a pending storm would delay their work, or how much they're looking forward to returning home after the last catch of the day, perhaps to being greeted at the door by their wife and children. And here, Jesus comes to them and says, "Follow me."

Two different calls, two radically different responses. Where do we see ourselves in these two stories? When we hear God's voice, do we run in fear and hide? Or do we drop everything and immediately follow? How do we respond to call in our own lives?

To explore these questions, we should first acknowledge how complex call can be—and how many different definitions of it exist. One of the most-compelling descriptions I've heard is by theologian and writer Frederick Buechner, who said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

You can read Buechner's full writings on call, along with many other prominent theologians. But I've actually learned the most about call in listening to people speak of their own. Like our Seminarian Associate Mike, who decided to transition from being a successful business owner to becoming a priest. And Father Manny, who decided as a young man to leave law school to do the same.

But make no mistake: though call is often associated with vocation, it's not just for ordained ministers. So together, I want to unpack three characteristics of a broader sense of call I believe relevant for all of us, as modern-day disciples of Christ.

First, call is something that often takes us out of our comfort zones—and delivers us to surprising places. If we're looking for call in the familiar, we're probably not going to find it.

About a week ago, I received an email from a woman named Kate, whose church in Eldersburg recently took on sponsoring an Afghan refugee family. Kate was searching for some guidance, and she heard about our refugee ministry. Several of our ministry leaders got on a call with her this past week, and we shared our experiences and lessons learned. We also planted some seeds of connection that I believe the Spirit will breathe Divine life into.

During the call, I asked Kate how she got involved in this effort. She explained she and her husband recently moved to Maryland, and as new members of Wesley Freedom Church, they told the pastor they'd like to get involved. In response, the pastor asked Kate if she'd consider helping the church sponsor a refugee family. And now Kate is one of just a handful of Wesley Freedom members working hard to help this father, mother, and two boys under the age of two—one with

developmental delays—a family that has moved upwards of five times over their 2 ½ years in the U.S.

I told Kate that we Episcopalians usually start our new members off helping with something a bit less intense—like setting up for coffee hour, or reading the lessons in worship. But what struck me was not how overwhelmed Kate was by this experience, one clearly out of her comfort zone—but how she spoke of it as a blessing. Even over Zoom, I could see it in her face and hear it in her voice. And I have no doubt it's an experience that will change her life. Call not only takes us out of our comfort zones—it delivers us to a place of unexpected opportunities for blessing and transformation.

What's more, call is often not big and epic—but instead, quite ordinary. We can get a sense of it in various ways: through a person or in nature, over many years or in a single moment, in stillness or in chaos. I've heard it described as a nagging thought that won't go away, a nudge, a stirring. I myself have experienced it a few times as a swift kick in the butt. It is frequently a thing we simply cannot ignore. Avoiding God's plans for our lives creates a restlessness that we try shake off, to ease with worldly distractions. But whether it takes something as dramatic as being swallowed by a whale, or comes in a softer ah-ha moment, call keeps pursuing us until we listen—and accept the peace that comes in fulfilling God's Divine purpose for us.

Finally, call is not a one-time thing. It's a day-by-day, minute-by-minute choice. Jesus's instructions for the people of Galilee are just as relevant for us today: "Repent, believe in the Good News, follow me." Follow Jesus in our everyday choices: welcoming a stranger walking into worship the first time, offering our presence to a co-worker who's struggling, forgiving someone who's offended us.

Our call story is a lifelong journey of saying yes to the uncomfortable and the unfamiliar. Do I see the pain in my brother and sister, and respond with love? Do I witness oppression and inequity and pursue justice, instead of looking the other way? Do I hear and heed God's whisper that yes, that person I am not like, and do not like, is God's beloved child, my neighbor, whom I'm to love and serve?

Where do we see ourselves in today's two epic call stories? From the belly of a whale to a seaport in northern Israel—from a reluctant prophet to common fishermen—most of us likely fall somewhere in between—a hazy place filled with questions about how we can be sure it's God's voice speaking to us—are we certain this is what God means us to do?

Epiphany shines a light into that shadowy space, seeking to illuminate the path to the Kingdom, a Kingdom we are each called to build up in our own ways. And uncertain and uneasy as it can seem, I believe our greatest opportunities for growth lie in that space, where God is working in ways we may not comprehend, but can trust, nonetheless. And on those bleak days when we look around this broken world and find ourselves struggling to trust, we might find strength in the words of Scripture such as this morning's Psalm: "For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken...Put your trust in him always...pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge."

In this season of Christ's light, let us trust in the God of Jonah, who called a reluctant prophet to save an entire people. Let us trust in God Incarnate, Jesus, who called ordinary men to leave behind all they knew and build his Church across the world. Let us find the courage to say yes to the One who is our rock and our refuge, for eternity.