

Sermon on Mark 1:14-20
Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 21, 2018
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

When I was a little boy growing up in south Minneapolis, I had a lot of friends in the neighborhood to play with. We loved to play in each others' yards on summer evenings, or kickball in the alley – we had the run of the neighborhood. When it got dark, we had to come inside, but too often, we stretched our playtime, because we were reluctant to go home. We didn't hear our parents calling us. One day my mother had had enough. She told me she had bought a whistle, and when I heard that whistle blow, my sister and I needed to come home right away. Sure thing. So that evening as the sun began to set, I heard this high pitched whistle from far away. Immediately my sister and I ran home, to see what kind of emergency this was. There was our mother, standing on the steps, blowing her whistle. So every night when we heard that whistle, we immediately came home.

Today's scripture lessons invite us in to see the marked contrasts between one person's *reluctance* to respond to God's call, and the *immediate* response of others to God's mercy and Jesus' call to follow. The contrast is almost comical.

First, let me remind you of the amazing story of Jonah, which has become the stuff of popular legend. Most everyone has heard of Jonah – even those who don't read the Bible. The story starts when the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying "Go to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before them." Jonah didn't want to go to Ninevah (the capitol city of Assyria), because they were hated enemies, so he fled in the opposite direction. Jonah got on a boat to sail away; but God hurled a mighty wind and a storm that would have sunk the ship. The sailors found Jonah asleep in the hold, so they threw him overboard. Then a great fish swallowed Jonah, who spent 3 days and nights in its belly. Jonah prayed to God in his distress, and so the fish spat Jonah out onto dry land. Which was on the shore near Ninevah. And so the Lord called Jonah a second time to preach repentance to Ninevah, which is where our story picked up today. Jonah did go to Ninevah, that great city, and gave the shortest sermon I have ever heard of: "*Forty days more, and Ninevah will be overthrown!*" And the people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and God did not do it." There is more to this story, but that is for another day. The point is, when Jonah found that it was no use to run away from God, and preached mercy to the people of Ninevah, the people believed God IMMEDIATELY and repented.

This kind of thing never happens, as all preachers know! If it worked so well here, this church would be full every Sunday, and the whole city of St. Paul would be kneeling in prayer, praising God. (Note that I'm not blaming you – you guys are here! Everybody else must be out there at a football stadium somewhere, or picking up crashed ice outside the cathedral!) So where are the people of Ninevah when you need them, to immediately respond with faith and fasting?

Then in the gospel we have witnessed another immediate response, by the disciples who heard Jesus' call to follow! The word "immediately" is a common term in Mark's gospel. Things happened fast in Mark. He had no time to write about the Christmas story of Jesus' birth. The beginning of the gospel of Mark starts with the prophet Isaiah telling about God's messenger, sent to prepare the way of the Lord. And *voila!* In the next verse, John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from all over the Judean countryside and Jerusalem came to hear John and be baptized by him. Shades of Jonah in Ninevah, only in reverse! Even Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. And after Jesus was baptized and came up out of the water, "*the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan and with the wild beasts for 40 days.*"

The gospel lesson we heard today started when John the Baptist had been arrested, and Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the same good news as John: "*he time is NOW, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" And people believed in Jesus, and began to follow him. Did they repent as quickly as the people of Ninevah? I don't know, but we do hear how Jesus approached fishermen on the sea of Galilee, like Simon and his brother Andrew casting nets into the sea. Jesus called out to them: "*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people!*" And IMMEDIATELY they left their nets and followed him. A little farther on and Jesus saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, mending their nets. IMMEDIATELY Jesus called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with his hired men, and followed Jesus. I've often wondered whatever happened to Zebedee's fishing business after that. I guess he had to change the sign which had read, "Zebedee & Sons" to something like "The Zebedee Doo Dah Catch Your Own Fish Co." Things were never the same again.

It never ceases to amaze us at how quickly the disciples left everything – nets, tax tables, their families, homes, and livelihoods – to follow Jesus. We can't imagine how anyone does this! We take so much time just to decide if we should move some furniture in our homes, or if we will respond to the pastor's call to serve on the Vestry or church council, or whether we dare ask people to join our church! We have so much trouble making decisions, or weighing the pros and cons! How do we even get out of bed on a Sunday morning? Many people don't!

Most of the time, we think about God's invitation as if we have an eternity to decide. When Jesus asks "follow me", we may think, "would you call back next Tuesday?" Or better yet, next year. Or after I finish school. Or once the kids are grown and out of the house. Or when I'm retired and have more time on my hands (Ha! That's a good one! Every try to FIND a retired person? They are too busy!)

We always think we have so much time, when God is asking us to listen and follow. We think we have all the time in the world. But we have also heard how "life is too short". Time flies – whether you are having fun or not.

These days as so much changes so fast in our world, perhaps we are beginning to appreciate the precious nature of the time God gives us. Yes, God is eternally patient, but times, they are a-changin', as the Dylan song goes.

For Salvadoran immigrants, who have been here since an earthquake destroyed their homes in the early 2000s, time is almost up. The Trump Administration wants to send them home. ICE puts out a warning, and suddenly all the immigrant bakers in the Saint Agnes Bakery don't show up for work, and the bakery shuts down. The time to feel safe baking bread is past, because someone promised to shake things up in Washington. So now everyone is nervous, looking over their shoulders, and people are disappearing. But the headline is: "Will There Be Enough Buns for Super Bowl Sandwiches in February?"

We have also heard #TIMES UP as a hashtag, from women who have for far too long been harassed and underpaid in their workplaces, and told to keep quiet about it. Now some are speaking up, and all of a sudden, immediately, powerful men in media, the film industry, and politics lose their jobs – even senators resign or retire – almost overnight. But other habits of racism, sexism, prejudice and discrimination just remain in place. People keep on hating and abusing others, and nothing seems to change for women, people of color, natives and immigrants. One day somebody's bad behavior goes public and the perpetrator is immediately gone. Other days, nothing happens despite the truth of the crime being investigated. Time is running out for dreamers. The clock keeps ticking on a government shutdown, unless congress kicks the can down the road once again for another month, another budget cycle, or another generation. Meanwhile, people lose their jobs, or their livelihoods, their fathers and their mothers, when nothing changes soon enough to save them. No wonder people are going crazy in this country.

If only we could respond immediately with repentance – which means "change" – and turn our lives and our nation around – like in the legend of Jonah and the people of Ninevah! If only we could put down our nets and follow Jesus like the disciples did in Galilee. But that never happens.....or does it?

But it does, and it can. The Berlin wall came down in Germany in 1989, because courageous people had faith. But usually it's one decision at a time. Maybe not so dramatically as it happened in these two Bible stories. But God calls

out to you and me with a daily invitation – sometimes more than once a day. Usually it's not about dropping your nets (and ways of making a living) or leaving your family, but with a kind of different invitation. Like when you have a hard decision to make about which way to go ethically, God's voice often is in your ear saying "Follow me. Do the right thing" – compassionately, thinking about other people as well as yourself. Consider the common good. You don't have to spread lies about "illegal immigrants" and say they should go back to their own countries, when you and I also descended from immigrants! Speak well of your neighbor and help them feel welcome, because we are all God's children. When a family is homeless and needs shelter, or an immigrant needs a place of safety and sanctuary, open your heart and your church – you can save a life!

When Jonah chose not to follow God's invitation, because of his hatred and prejudice toward the people of Ninevah, he ran away and got into all kinds of trouble. His life became a real mess! But when he found himself in Ninevah, and simply said what God asked him to say, good things happened! In fact, it was a miracle! The same thing happened with the disciples who followed Jesus.

It's not as if there were no more challenges, however. Jonah still went through some struggles, because his stubbornness and anger remained – he was upset that the people of Ninevah repented. He wanted them destroyed! Jonah had to suffer a little bit more because of what he did to himself. Jonah had to learn a great lesson about himself, and about God's mercy for everyone. In the end, we don't know what Jonah did with all that he learned, but we can learn a lot ourselves from hearing Jonah's story and from his mistakes. Our lives will be changed when we follow God's commandments to have mercy, and let go of hatred and prejudice for our neighbors – even our greatest enemies. If only our elected leaders will come to learn this lesson as well. But let's not wait for them. If you are a democrat and find yourselves in a room full of republicans, don't run away! Talk to them – they are your neighbors, too. And vice versa.

After they left their nets, the disciples went through a lot. In the end they all died as martyrs – witnesses for their faith in Jesus as the son of God. But if you asked any of them if they thought it was worth it, risking their lives and dying for their faith. Every one of them would have said "yes!" They gave up everything for the one who risked and gave everything for them and for us, and it changed EVERYTHING in their lives. It changed the whole world! This invitation to follow Jesus is always open for you and for me, and changes everything in our lives, when we follow him and his voice!

So when you hear that voice inside – or God's Word – invite you to follow Jesus, what will you say? I hope that you and I can say "yes, I hear your voice, I believe, and I will follow." Amen.