

Odd Fellows Turning

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

What we hear in both scriptures today is about the turning of rather odd groups of people. As one of my devotionals pointed out this week, the rather churchy term “repent” is a word for turning, as in turning from the path that you’re on by turning to a different one.

The idea of repentance and turning are intimately connected with the idea of calling which we talked about last week in discussing the texts about the boy Samuel being called by God during the night, and then the calling of Philip and Nathanael by Jesus in the gospel of John, acknowledging that in both instances that there was a greater promise of things to come in each calling.

How do we determine when to turn or change direction, and when not to?

There are a lot of factors that comprise such a decision. I’d say the biggest one has to be receptivity. If things are going great, and you are quite content, then change seems like an odd proposition. Why would I want to change when I’m happy with where I am? Of course, most of what we do is oriented to making ourselves happy, doing the things we want to do, and gaining sufficient satisfaction to feel good about ourselves. Having spent all kinds of time, energy, and resources to get to this pleasant point, why upset things with some big change? Why even consider it, no matter how good it may sound?

Going hand-in-hand with receptivity, the next big factor in making a new turn would seem to be motivation. It is possible to be quite satisfied and content with where you are in life, but is there significant motivation to do something different? We might concede that the older you get, the more likely that such motivation is in shorter supply. Middle age to retirement would seem to be the last times when motivation to make a significant turn in life is going to happen. The energy to push into new territory after those early years around retirement slip away simply doesn’t seem to be in great supply.

Energy would seem to be the next factor to consider. Making major changes tends to be stressful, a big consumer of energy. Expending energy in all kinds of different directions is fine for younger people who have it in spades. But it doesn’t go quite as far the older you get. There grows a tendency to conserve energy rather than expend it. Conserving energy becomes the pattern, the norm. And perhaps that points to a problem with the way we age, that we grow into a pattern of conserving energy rather than finding new ways of expending it. Our default behavior becomes *not* to do different things *because* they require us to spend energy. We don’t have to spend our precious energy (perceived to be diminished and lacking) on the things that we’re used to doing. On the matter of change, are we willing to spend the necessary energy to make a big turn in our lives and shake things up?

Let me add one final factor, admitting that I haven’t exhausted the list by any means. That would be focus. Making a major turn requires focus, keeping your eyes and

attention on this new road. There are lots of distractions fully baked into our existing lives. How focused are we able to become to set aside the usual things that grab our attention and focus on the new direction which we're seeking to pursue? Those distractions can sap our energy and divide our attention, slowing progress to a crawl, and maybe leading to the abandonment of this direction.

Bearing these major factors in mind, we turn to God's mission for Jonah. The lectionary omitted all the good stuff in the Jonah story in this cycle. To review, you'll recall how Jonah wanted to serve the Lord, but he wanted to go where he wanted to go. God wanted him to go to Nineveh; Jonah wanted to go to Tarshish. Okay, so it turns out Jonah wanted God to serve him first. Jonah got rather uppity and tried to sail to Tarshish. God applied some unique corrective measures with a terrific storm and a big fish, and *voila!* The text says: *Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.*

Nineveh was the huge capital city of the Assyrian empire with as many as 150,000 people. It's an ancient city even in Jonah's time, having begun around 6000 BCE. It was quite possibly the location referred to as the "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" thanks to the extensive irrigation the city engineered during the height of the Assyrian Empire under Sennacherib. On the contemporary map, it would be in northern Iraq by Mosul on the Tigris River in the Kurdish territory.

Nineveh, of course, was a city of pagans, people who had no relationship to the God of Israel, and who had proven quite hostile to them in the past. To Jonah, this seems to be a waste of time. Who in Nineveh is going to care one bit about what the God of Israel says? Quite frankly, Jonah has a great point. Why should they care? It seems like a stupid and futile errand. 'Y'know, at least in Tarshish ... oh, never mind.'

Jonah has learned that God has no sense of humor about servants saying "no" when God calls them to a specific task. Jonah decides it's wisest to go through the motions at least, proclaiming God's word for them. However, you could also imagine that Jonah didn't exactly have a passionate dedication to this task.

If we take the text literally, then we have this strange man walking through the streets of the city saying, I'm guessing with little inspiration: *Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.* This doesn't explain who Jonah is, whose word he is citing, on whose authority he is citing it, and he uses the somewhat inept word "overturn," and Jonah never identifies why the city will be overturned. In fact, we don't even hear God give Jonah this word to say, but let's assume God did.

Despite all that Jonah had done to evade, avoid, and even undermine this mission from God, Job did get the job done. He didn't seem to be any good at his job, but given the likelihood of having any impact, he might be forgiven for his lack of motivation. We can presume that he did actually traverse the city, and did actually utter his little recitation as he went, and did so loud enough to be heard.

The astonishing result was that the people of Nineveh repented of their sins and plead for mercy. They turned; it worked! The odd fellows of Nineveh, who had no reason to turn, to repent and seek forgiveness, did so!

Then, confounding everything Jonah had expected, God hears their repentance and is merciful. God does not destroy the city, and Jonah is incredulous, and angry. And that takes us to another Jonah story.

This prophet, the only reluctant prophet in the Hebrew scriptures, has more lessons to learn. And while he may be the only reluctant, recalcitrant prophet in the Old Testament, he is also ironically, *prima facie* at least, the most successful one, too. Go figure.

One final interesting note about Jonah and his mission is that the people who were not expected to be obedient to the call of God **were**, and Jonah, the one who was expected to be obedient to the call of God, **never** really got on board with what God was doing. Again, go figure – an expression that well characterizes the book of Jonah.

Our other passage about odd fellows turning to a new and different direction is typically Mark; it's very tight and surprisingly fast-paced. The first clause of verse 14 is a load: *After John was put in prison....* Woah! We had just met John the Baptist only 10 verses before. Now all of a sudden, John is arrested. We don't know why or anything, just that terse little blurb, *After John was put in prison....* Thanks, gospel of Mark!

It continues, *Jesus went into Galilee ...*, again, a pretty terse explanation how Jesus quickly went from the Jordan River area, where John the Baptist had been, to the hills of Galilee. Although you'll remember from last week's passage from John's gospel that Jesus was **planning** a trip to Galilee. Was it a *planned* trip? Was it coincidental that Jesus had traveled to Galilee just when the persecution came upon John's community? Or did Jesus flee to Galilee when the persecution came? We'll never know for sure what happened.

Anyway, Jesus is in Galilee in Mark's account, and John has been arrested. Jesus is preaching in Galilee, calling people to repent and believe the good news. It sounds rather like John the Baptist except there is no baptism being preached.

Then he comes to the Sea of Galilee – *really*, a nice-sized lake. He encounters fishermen there, first Peter and his brother Andrew, then James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee. Jesus says, *Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men..* They drop everything and follow him.

Now, I know things in Mark move with blinding speed, but this is quite something. Supposedly, this person whom these guys have never seen before – Mark's gospel mentions no prior relationship, although John's gospel does – whose name may be unknown to them, says about ten words, and they drop everything to follow him. And not just follow him to the mailbox, to the jiffy store, or to the train station. They follow him forever. *Forever*. That's nuts, right?

I feel badly for old man Zebedee. His boys, James and John, drop everything, the fish, the nets, the whole thing, and leave their dad sitting in the boat. No explanation, off they go with this stranger. Hopefully a *Seeya, Pops!* went unrecorded.

We can be very exuberant in understanding this story, that the disciples were so overwhelmed by Jesus that they dropped everything. The only problems are that Jesus does nothing and says nothing overwhelming, and the disciples never seem to be so awestruck by Jesus ever again. Although we have no biblical record of it, it stands to reason that Peter and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee were all familiar with Jesus from their time together with John the Baptist. When John gets arrested and the persecution comes down, they **all** headed for Galilee – the most likely place to flee. Here, Jesus brings them together to start his ministry.

If that was the approximate scenario, it makes the sudden departure of the four men upon Jesus' call quite a bit more comprehensible. Still, they got on-board with Jesus pretty suddenly, and I suppose Mark's account intended that effect of faithful response from those called by Jesus who would be with him until the end.

And really, they had no idea what they were getting into. They may have thought that there would be an easy out when the whole thing fell apart, just like with John the Baptist. That's how it always comes out, doesn't it? The one with a vision and calling for God's work speaks out and steps on toes. Then the authorities come down on leader and shut him up quick.

Although they had no idea what this would entail, they wanted to be in and were willing to take the risk in this new direction, this enterprise with a man of vision. They sought to serve God faithfully, apparently eager to serve the Lord and walk with him in his ministry.

Not many will turn to walk with the Lord in a new direction. The older we get, the more inertia has a commanding presence and priority in our lives. It's just easier not to do something, and in a matter of seconds we can conjure up a half dozen good reasons to let it be, let it go, and forget about it. But the Lord expects us to be his witnesses.

The Lord calls us in the church to be his living presence in the world, working to advance the kingdom of justice and righteousness. Those who respond are the odd fellows who turn aside to answer the call to serve, to sacrifice, to be builders in the Kingdom.