

Showing Up to Serve

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

When I was Associate Pastor in Fairfax, a major part of my work was with the Youth Group. The mission trip after school let out was an annual event that took the group out of state on a service project.

My first year's mission trip was to Detroit. A couple of parent leaders originally from suburban Detroit had set it up in advance. The mission project was hosted by the Presbytery and drew interest from across the country. Over 300 youth were expected. That is, until the details about the arrangements emerged.

The expectation among many of those signing up was that youth would be in the Detroit area, during the daytime, and retreat to the safety and comfort of the suburbs in the evening. When those who had signed up discovered that the youth would be staying *in* urban Detroit, sleeping on the floor of a ramshackle Catholic school to which they would be restricted at night for safety reasons, those were details that had an impact.

The 300 registered rapidly dwindled as cancellations rolled in, dropping to less than 150 by the time groups arrived there. A few groups may also have seen the place when they arrived and, after feasting their gaze on a virtually barren landscape around the school, decided that a return trip home was the best move. With a few cracks houses scattered eerily about the neighborhood, the only standing structures amid the urban devastation, perhaps you couldn't blame them. The 300 were down to about 120 when things got going the next day.

We were not going home. The parents who set this up supported the kids who were game to stay and try it. Of course, the kids were young, stupid, and naïve, but regardless they were undaunted. We were staying. We showed up to serve, not to be served. We had an awesome week.

I don't mean to suggest that *every* occasion we encounter requires us to repress our anxiety, suck it up, and get to work on whatever the project is, wherever it is, and with whomever it involves. No, that's too much to ask.

But I think we miss a lot when we don't show up. Author Brene Brown says: *The willingness to show up changes us; it makes us a little braver each time.* We miss the opportunity to see what something is all about, to learn more, to experience something that stretches our awareness and understanding. We actually become less, made smaller by a reluctance to pursue what God has presented to us as a challenge.

Actor and director Woody Allen is often quoted as saying, "80% of life is showing up." In an [interview in 2008](#), Allen was talking about how discipline was critical for him, the repetitive practice, the hours, the doing of the thing, how it was far more important than brains or talent – both of which were useless without discipline. Then he elaborated on what he meant in his quote, "80% of life is showing up."

I made the statement years ago which is often quoted that 80 percent of life is showing up. People used to always say to me that they wanted to write a play, they wanted to write a movie, they wanted to write a novel, and the couple of people that did it were 80 percent of the way to having something happen. All the other people struck out without ever getting that far. They couldn't do it, that's why they don't accomplish a thing. They don't do the thing. So once you do it, if you actually write your film script, or write your novel, you are more than half way towards something good happening.

Just showing up makes a huge difference. Taking the first step is the key to success; nothing happens *until* you take that first step.

In the first reading from Jonah, we've omitted all the good stuff. But you'll recall how Jonah wanted to serve the Lord, but he wanted to go where he wanted to go. Okay, so it turns out Jonah wanted God to serve him first. Jonah got rather uppity; God applied some unique corrective measures, and *voila!* – Jonah is in the very place he wanted nothing to do with. Jonah showed up: *Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.*

Nineveh was a huge city of the Assyrian empire with as many as 150,000 people. It was quite possibly the location referred to by the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon” thanks to the extensive irrigation the city engineered. On the contemporary map, it would be in northern Iraq near Mosul 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.

Jonah has learned that God does not have a sense of humor about servants saying “no.” Jonah sets himself to the task, proclaiming God's word for them, but 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 now undermine this mission from God, Job did show up. He didn't seem to be any good at his job, although we can surmise that he did actually traverse the city and did actually mutter his little recitation as he went loud enough to be heard.

The astonishing result was that the people of Nineveh were led by their king to repent of their sins and plead for mercy. 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.

Just showing up made all the difference in the story of Jonah and Nineveh. This story and the others are so amusing in their contradictions that some scholars debate whether Jonah was designed as a series of parables or was actually satire.

Doping something new can be rather startling for everyone. Very funny stand-up comedian Mike Birbiglia said: *Directing your first film is like showing up to the field trip in seventh grade, getting on the bus, and making an announcement, 'So today I'm driving the bus.' And everybody's like, 'What?' And you're like, 'I'm gonna drive the bus.' And they're like, 'But you don't know how to drive the bus.'*

It's true; knowing how to drive the bus, having a special license and all, would be preferable. But there is always that first time you simply show up and do something. Like Jonah, you may not do it well, but it can be amazing what happens when you give it a chance.

Our other passage from the gospel of Mark is typically Mark, 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 hit the road from the Jordan River area, where John the Baptist had been, to the hills of Galilee.

As Jesus is proclaiming the gospel, calling people to repent and believe the good news, he comes to the Sea of Galilee – 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 they have never seen before, 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 head for Galilee – the most likely place to flee. 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. Nonetheless, Jesus said in effect, 'Let's go drive the school bus,' and they said, "Sure!"

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 steps out and the authorities come down on him and shut him up quick.

Although they had no idea what this would entail, they showed up, wanting to serve God faithfully, apparently eager to serve the Lord and walk with him in his ministry.

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. The least we could do is show up to serve.