

THE CALL OF GOD

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

Rev. Roberts, January 22, 2012, Hampton Baptist Church

What does it mean to experience God? A few years ago, there was a popular book and then a musical that tried to describe what it meant to experience God. Though the book was popular, I wonder if it didn't try to capture an experience with God in too comfortable a format that may not reflect the experiences in the scriptures for those who discover God's calling in their lives. It seems that there is a comfortable kind of religion where God is made a part of our church culture or even our national culture. Then there is an wildly different version shaking us down to our very core that is reflected in the scriptures. While an experience with God may be comforting, it was certainly not so in the two incidents we read today.

The first came from the Old Testament book of Jonah. While folks often get hung up on the fish story in Jonah, that is not the core of the book. I remember a man who told of hearing two sermons on Jonah. He said that the first spent thirty minutes explaining how a man might survive in the stomach of a whale. He said that the second sermon devoted its full attention to why Jonah had to be taken literally. He said that he found nothing from either sermon to help him with his life. The core of the book reflects the experience of reluctant prophet who does not want to embody the character of God dealing with those who are his enemies. The experience he is fighting is having God destroy his assumptions and replace them with a whole new set of attitudes toward those Jonah regarded as his enemies. Compassion came at the high price of having to deal with the changed hearts of those whom he believed were unworthy of God's grace. Jonah was losing his comfort zone, his runaway heart, and his desire to be shielded from a direct encounter with his enemies. Instead, he was directed for the second time to head for the city he hated, Nineveh, and be the instrument of God's grace among those whom he wanted God to toast in judgment.

The second scripture we read is another undomesticated version of God at work. Mark records that Jesus was walking by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the freshwater lake in northern Palestine that measures about 8 by 13 miles. Walking by the side of waters was a common experience in this area, and talking with the fishermen who had brought in their boats was part of everyday life around Capernaum. Yet, as Jesus was walking, he met some fishermen, perhaps not for the first time, and invited two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, and James and John, to be his disciples. In that decisive moment, Jesus came to totally shift the direction of their lives. He told them a strange word, *“Follow me and I will make you fish for people”* (1:17 NRSV). Instead of doing what they had always done, they would be on a mission Jesus to which Jesus was calling them. In the ordinary pursuits of life, he brought an extraordinary challenge that they accepted and a task that they undertook. Simon and Andrew left their work and boat behind, James and John left their father with the hired workers, and the four headed off to submit themselves to God's rule. It was hardly what they had expected in life.

Those encounters may help us to recognize what it means to experience God in our lives. His call comes to awaken us to what it is He is doing and to invite us to become a part of that. Let's look at some of the ways God is calling us this morning as those who face His challenge.

I. When God calls us, He invites each of us to become disciples of Jesus.

A mother was having problems with her five-year-old son because he insisted at age five that he had to wear the same type of clothes every day that his best friend was going to wear. They had to be the same brand with the same logos on them. After several unsuccessful attempts to persuade her son against giving in to such peer pressure in kindergarten, in desperation she blurted out, *“Jesus is our leader. We follow him, not our friends.”* After a moment's pause, her son replied, *“Mom, what's Jesus wearing today?”* (*In Other Words*, 11/91, p. 2).

I somehow don't think that is quite what she had in mind, but we need to ask again, *“What does it mean to answer Jesus's call?”* There are at least three words that I believe describe the call to discipleship in which we experience God through Jesus Christ. Those words are **relationship**, **growth**, and **submission**.

It is clear that the first requirement in Jesus' call to his disciples was that of **relationship**. They had to be willing to enter a relationship with Him. It was a voluntary moment in which they were linking their lives with him. One of our historic Baptist distinctives is that we have insisted on a regenerate church membership—those who have deliberately declared an intention to follow Jesus and who have entered a relationship with Him. We are those who receive a relationship with him.

This relationship is never intended to be a static reality. **Growth** is required. Growth is our second word. Jesus did not start with disciples who were ready to head into the world to address His purposes and minister for Him. He started with folks who were sometimes like a five-year-old asking, "And what is Jesus wearing today?" They had to grow into the tasks he had for them, often not showing they had made progress until after his death and resurrection. Like the disciples, we are all in a process of development to become what God intends. Even when the story of Jonah closes, the prophet is still struggling to accept the grace of God as the standard for his life. He would still like a kosher wiener roast on the ashes of his enemies' capital city.

If growth is not enough of a challenge, then comes **submission**. I don't know about you, but I suspect many of you are like me. You want to think you are in charge of your life. That was one of my struggles ever to get into pastoral ministry or to stay in it for over 37 years. I have never enjoyed turning over the controls for my life, but I know it has been better when I did. For the disciples, going with Jesus meant that he would set the agenda. That still hasn't changed. It is still about a relationship, growth, and submission.

In our culture, we admire prominent people, but those most frequently named are athletes, movie stars, and popular music personalities. We endlessly pursue the latest gossip on these celebrities. As columnist Sidney Harris noted a few years ago, we have fixated on people who have made it big, not on people who have done big things. With Jesus, we find a different path.

- II. As God calls us, He invites us into a life of service for Him. In both the calls of Jonah and the call of Jesus to His disciples, there is a definite intention for service. Just as I am certain God called each of the disciples to serve, He calls each of us to serve. The life to which we are called is not simply one of privilege and position, not simply our guarantee of a place in heaven and some form of eternal security. We are not invited to be spectators but players. Jonah was sent to share God's purpose with his worst enemies. Jesus branded his followers as "salt and light," those forces that change all the things they touch. We are all called to make a difference because of our relationship with Christ.

In our studies of James on Wednesday nights, we have been focusing on how Christians behave because of what we believe. Often we expect that our service will come in extraordinary places and unusual circumstances. Some of those opportunities do come in those ways, but most of them come in the day-to-day routines of our lives. A few of us may go to our modern Nineveh, engage in mission ventures, share in large-scale disaster relief. Most of us will go to work, go to the gym, go to school, go to the mall, work in the yard, or go about our daily tasks. The opportunities for ministry may present themselves in a neighbor's conversation across the mailbox, in a chance to help a child who is unable to get in his or her home after school because of a lost key, in the sharing across lunch in a restaurant we frequent, or when someone stops us in the hallway at church. They may come as we host the homeless in a few weeks. God is not just interested in our exceptional opportunities; he is interested in using us in the daily flow of life. God calls us all into his service.

- III. As God calls us, He beckons us to accept specific responsibilities for Him. For Jonah, his specific responsibility was to go to Nineveh, a calling he tried to evade and then fulfilled only with the greatest reluctance. God had given him a direct responsibility. For Jesus' disciples, the call was to catch men and women with the message of what God was doing in their midst. Just as these individuals were called to specific tasks, God is still calling us with direct tasks he has for us.

One of the places we find God's direct call is in our relationship to the church in which we share our relationship with Christ. I am convinced that God calls individuals to serve in specific congregations for his glory. One of the false trends of church selection in our society is a consumerist mentality that asks what a

congregations provides and does for us rather than what God is calling us to do through that congregation. I believe that God has called specific people to serve here just as surely as he has called staff members to minister here. Churches do not need people who are merely numbers on a computerized record of members. We need people who recognize that serving here is part of God's purpose for their lives. Church is intended to be the fellowship of those who are committed together to the calling of God to do together what they can never do alone.

God's calling can also be to fulfill special tasks for him. I am inescapably convinced that God called me into pastoral ministry. No matter how many detours have come in my life, I have always come back to the conviction God expected me in ministry. At the same time, I am equally convinced that God calls as certainly in the lives of many who will never be ordained into ministry or share a church-related vocation. One of the people who helped me see this most clearly was a lady named Gladys Collins who was in one of the churches I served. As she told her story, she declared that God had called her to work with four- and five-year-old children. Therefore, she had determined to be the best worker she could become. She attended state and national workshops, took college courses, became a resource worker available to other churches to help with their programs. The core, however, was working with these children. Well into her eighties, she was still teaching four- and five-year-old Sunday School. Gladys was certain this was God's calling in her life. I have already experienced some of the callings to which some of you have responded. I am certain there are many others I do not know. Yet, I see the potential of what can happen when we give God his rightful place. What is God seeking in your life? In my life? Will we do it?

CONCLUSION

To Amy Carmichael are attributed these fitting poetic words:

I heard Him call, "Come Follow,"
That was all.

My gold grew dim,
My soul went after him
I rose and followed,
That was all.

Who would not follow
If they heard him call?

As we hear his call today, what will we do in response to that calling? He is calling, inviting, beckoning. Will we heed that call?