

KNOWING THE RIPE TIME

The time is now! Follow me!

Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62:5-12

Bible stories like the ones we heard this morning
simply amaze me.
They stun me, and disturb me.

Take the story of Jonah.

Now, Jonah is an interesting story, all right,
what with him running away from his call to be a prophet,
and hiding on a ship at sea,
and the great storm that almost sinks the ship,
and Jonah being thrown overboard and eaten by a big fish,
and then spit up onto shore alive and well and humbled.
It's all a very interesting, and colorful story.
But that's not the part of the story that stuns me.

Where I am simply blown away by this story,
where my ability to imagine and believe is stretched to its limits,
is what happens in the lives of the people of Ninevah,
simply as a result of hearing the call of God.
Just because they were told by a strange prophet
that God was unhappy with them,
that judgment was imminent if they didn't mend their ways . . .
. . . they *immediately mended their ways*.
They underwent a radical, and complete,
and utter cultural transformation.
From top to bottom.
From the great King and his court,
to the merchants,
to the peasants
to every one of their cows and goats.
The king led the charge toward repentance and transformation,
and everyone followed,
all 120,000 of them, and their animals.
Just because God spoke the word.

We all know how difficult and complicated it is to change a culture.

We know how much conflict erupts,
when *anyone* introduces *any* change into *any* social system.
But Ninevah turned on a dime.
They started on a new path together,
from king to cow.

Now if that story doesn't surprise and amaze and disturb you,
certainly nothing will.
And to think that the stumbling block for *most* people
in believing this story,
is Jonah getting swallowed by a big fish.
That's nothing.

And then there's today's Gospel story,
a pretty straight-forward account
of Jesus calling four fisherman to become his disciples,
and they say yes.

When you hold this short story over against stories like
Jesus turning water into wine,
or touching and curing a leper,
or feeding five-thousand with a few loaves of bread,
this little story about the fisherman who followed
hardly registers on the radar.
Unless you actually pay attention to the details of this story.
This is a miracle story to top *all* miracle stories.

How could two words, "Follow me,"
coming from an obscure itinerant rabbi,
cause otherwise sensible business persons
to drop everything and go.
Who, in their right mind, would *do* such a thing?
Simon and Andrew were actually in the act of casting their nets,
when they heard the words, "Follow me."
And they immediately—get *that?*—
immediately left their nets,
hanging over the side of the boat I imagine,
and followed after Jesus.

And they come upon their competitors in the fishing industry,
a two-generation operation—Zebedee and Sons, Inc.
They were in the middle of a big and messy job—
sitting in their boat mending their nets,
when sons James and John heard the words, “Follow me.”
And immediately *they* got up.
Father Zebedee was left holding the nets,
too stunned for words.

This kind of thing simply doesn’t happen.
Sensible persons who need to provide for a family,
do not suddenly abandon a stable job and income,
and head off down the road
without an inkling of where they are going
and for how long
and with what resources—
just because a persuasive stranger *asked* them to.

This is another stunning story of unlikely faithfulness.
This story, and the story of the people of Ninevah,
are stories of God’s call,
and a human response that is unbelievably radical,
immediate, and sacrificial.

And of course, our first thought is,
would *we* be willing to do that?
We make this into a morality story,
a test of our commitment.
Are *we* ready and willing to make such a great sacrifice?
That’s the question preachers love to ask of their congregations,
when they preach sermons on these texts.
That’s the question *I* have asked of you before,
when preaching from this text.

In fact, I went back and looked.
Exactly nine years ago I preached on this text here at Park View,
on this same third Sunday after Epiphany.
I’m *sure* you recall.
Here is what I said, and I quote,

“When we hear the invitation of Jesus, ‘Follow me,’
can we respond, as if nothing else mattered?
Are we able to divest of those things,
and re-invest in the kingdom?”

That’s the question we love to ask: *Can we do it?*
And the implied answer *is*, of course: *We must* do it.
It is our Christian duty to drop everything,
to make every personal sacrifice,
and follow Jesus radically, completely, immediately.
Faithful Christian disciples *will* count the cost, and say “yes.”

If we listen to a story like this, and say to ourselves,
“*Yes*, I can do this, too. I am ready,”
we’re missing something important here.
Honesty.

Let *me* be brutally honest.
I wouldn’t do it.
I couldn’t do it.
To walk away from literally every commitment,
commitment to my wife and children,
commitment to myself,
commitment to be a good steward of my resources,
of my gifts, training, and experience.
To walk away from every commitment,
just because a persuasive stranger said “Follow me”?
It’s something I simply cannot imagine myself doing.
Now all the rest of you need to be just as honest.
And admit to yourself that you couldn’t do that either.
No one, in their right mind,
walks away from every sacred commitment you’ve made,
immediately and without hesitation,
onto a totally new and completely undefined life path.

So where does that *leave* us?
It leaves us right where we need to be.
Recognizing that this story is a miracle story.

That this is not a story about the resolve and willpower
of four fisherman.
It is a story about the power of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor
is a preacher, teacher, and prolific author.
She had some thoughts on this text,
in one of her sermons entitled “Miracle on the Beach.”

She said this is a story about God, *not* the disciples or us.
If we look only at what the disciples gave up
(and ask if we could do the same),
we “put the accent on the wrong syllable.”
She writes,
This is really a miracle story about “the power of God—
to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle,
creating faith where there *was* no faith,
creating disciples where there *were* none just a moment before.”
In our emphasis on mustering up the faith and courage to follow,
She says we have lost “the full sense of the power of God—
to recruit people who have made terrible choices;
to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light;
to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God,
and smack them upside the head with glory.”

What a difference it makes to see this as a miracle story.
The call of God comes to us as grace and as gift.
And no matter *how* faltering our steps,
or no matter *how* courageous and radical and sacrificial,
our ability to follow Jesus *also* depends wholly on God’s grace.
Not a one of us can claim to have what it takes
to drop everything to follow Jesus.
Not a one of us should go from this place
feeling proud that we can do it,
or feeling shame that we can’t.
No, we should go from this place with gratitude for God’s grace,
and simply an openness to receive that grace once again,
whenever God calls us to take the next step.

There’s a myth that abounds in our culture,
that says we shape our own lives,
and that we create our own destinies.
Our new president campaigned under the slogan, “Yes, we can.”
And there *was* a lot of truth in that statement.
Yes, working together as a community of people,
there is a lot we can accomplish that is impossible
when we’re working alone,
or working against others.
But persons who put their faith in a God of grace,
must pause when we hear that kind of pure human optimism.
We must add an important qualifier.
We can . . .
with God’s help.
by God’s grace alone.

I think at this point in our history as a nation,
many of us naturally put a great deal
of hope, expectation, and even trust
in a new presidential administration.

We hope and pray and expect
that the power of a well-run national government
can and will restore peace and justice and hope around the world.

I admit my share of hopefulness about the new administration.
I hope, and I pray, that there might be some signs of a new day.
A new willingness to listen to opposing points of view,
to engage in thoughtful, deliberate, and civil debate.
A new openness to establish meaningful dialogue
with those who we consider our enemies.

But you know, as a nation,
we might have a new driver behind the wheel,
but we haven’t traded in the car.
We are still enamored with systems of power
that bring about our collective will through pressure and coercion,
that rely on the power of the sword,
that are happiest when *we* are winning over *them*,

when *we* have the upper hand.

As a nation, we still have no clue
about the power of love and sacrifice,
such as the power demonstrated by God in Jesus Christ.
And we probably can't *expect* that from national government.
And the Church *should be* a bit suspicious of the State.

It helps sometimes to be reminded of how God looks upon
our human structures of power.

Psalm 62 was chanted and sung this morning.
Listen once again.
Listen for clues about where to put our trust.

⁵ For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.

⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are *together* lighter than a breath.

¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,

¹² and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

Now, this does not mean a life of passivity.
Either for ourselves as a nation,
or for us as a church,
or for us as individual disciples.
God does not intend that we sit on our hands,
and wait for God to whip out his rod of power, and act.
No, we *have* work to do.
Hard work.
Risky work.
Sacrificial work.

But it is not our work that produces results.
No, it's our work that gives God tools to work *with*.

We don't earn God's favor by trying harder.
By being more saintly.
By sacrificing more.
By demonstrating our holiness.
We're talking here about the God who said,
I don't want your sacrifices and burnt offerings.
I want you to let my righteousness dwell in you.
I want you to open yourself to my life, living in you.
I am the source, *you* are the channel.

So how do we follow Jesus faithfully, when he calls us?
Some of us are prone to thinking that we have to
work up the strength to follow.
That before we can follow,
we need to put everything that's in disarray
back into perfect order,
and be fully prepared in every way
to embark on such a life-changing journey.

Did we *forget* that when disciples left and followed Jesus,
there was unfinished work?
There were *still* holes in the nets James and John were mending.
Simon and Andrew were in the middle of a catch.

Our position, as potential disciples,
is to be open to the work *God* wants to do in us.
God does *not* demand of us an immediate impossibility.
God invites people who are open.
And God provides what is needed for the journey,
when it is needed.

God's time may or may not be our time.
But God's time is the ripe time.
When the time is ripe, the fruit literally falls off the vine
as a gift from God.
When the time is *not* ripe,

we have to work extra hard to pick it,
and it still won't be worth much when it gets into our hands.
When the time is *not* ripe,
no amount of effort on our part will produce satisfying,
life-giving fruit.
Try as we might. And we do try.

At this realization,
the only response that has much integrity,
is a response of humility, and confession.

Let us pray a prayer of confession.
I will lead it,
and you respond, when indicated, with the words,
God of love and power, forgive us.
Together,
God of love and power, forgive us.

God who called us into being,
and called us to follow your ways,
we confess that we have failed to rightly understand
the nature of your call.
And so we pray together,
God of love and power, forgive us.

At times we have launched out on our own,
thinking we might create justice,
and make peace,
and construct righteousness,
out of nothing but our sheer will and strength.
And so we pray,
God of love and power, forgive us.

At times we have strayed down the other path,
thinking there is nothing we can do,
and have chosen passivity,
and indifference,
and inaction.

And so we pray,
God of love and power, forgive us.

Forgive us for acting too quickly and forcefully,
and for letting opportunities pass by.
Forgive us for our sins of commission and omission.
For every time we have failed to recognize the ripe time,
we pray,
God of love and power, forgive us.

God of love, we look to you alone, in trust.
God of power, in you alone, we put our hope.
Reveal yourself to us.
Reveal your time.
Call us.
And by your grace alone, by your power alone,
we will follow.

Amen.

—Philip L. Kniss, January 25, 2009