

January 22, 2006
Jonah 1:1-10, Mark 1:14-20
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“Defining Moments”

There are moments in every person's life which stand out from all the rest. When we look back on these moments, we realize that they become for us the time a door opens or another closes, a time of entering a new adventure or letting go of a long-held dream. In "The Road Less Traveled," psychiatrist Scott Peck writes that such a moment came for him when he defied his family's tradition and expectation that he attend a certain prep school. He knew in his heart that it was not the path for him. He said that the decision made all the difference and set the course of his future life.

I have told some of you about the time when I was a senior in college and applied for a fellowship that would have allowed me to attend any seminary of my choice. I was not at all certain I wanted to be a minister; but I loved the Bible and the study of theology. I had a hunger to learn more. I was a finalist for the fellowship but, in the end, a friend of mine actually won it. So, I shelved my idea of attending seminary and began to think of other options. One day that spring, out of the blue, I received a phone call from the President of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, offering me the opportunity to attend seminary on a year's trial fellowship. You might say God opened a door for me and a new adventure began.

In William Shakespeare's play, "Julius Caesar," Caesar is contemplating the choices before him and is wondering if this is the time for decisive action. Caesar says:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries. (Act iv. Scene 3)

Such moments come to us and call us to decision.

God calls Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and call the wicked city to repentance. It is a defining moment that demands a response. At the first high tide, Jonah catches a boat headed for Tarshish and flees from God. Located near the mouth of the Mediterranean, Tarshish was the end of the earth. Jonah prefers the misery of flight to the frightening possibility of answering God's call. Sometimes, we try to flee as far as we can from God's call. We cover our ears; we play the music a little louder; we spend our time shopping or drinking ourselves into a stupor; we ignore the little voice inside our head that nudges us toward God; we refuse to listen to what anyone is saying to us.

Every Christian has a calling. Our calling is to follow Jesus Christ. God certainly isn't calling all of us to go to Nineveh. God certainly isn't calling all of us to be ministers of word and sacrament or teachers, youth leaders, musicians, educators and pastors of local

churches. All of us are not called to be elders and deacons. Yet, we are called to use the gifts we have to serve Jesus Christ in the home, church and world. The very word, "vocation," comes from the Latin "vocatio," which means "to summon or to call." Your vocation is not just a job; your vocation is a calling. We do what we do every day of our lives in response to God's call to serve.

Just as Jonah runs from his calling, we hear in the gospel of Mark how the disciples take up their calling. Simple fishermen, farmers, shepherds, homemakers and artisans who hear the good news of the Kingdom of God proclaimed, see the kingdom come to life in Jesus and follow Him.

They leave their familiar haunts and hiding places and set out on the road with Jesus. It was not as if the call they receive is disconnected to everything they have ever known and done. Quite the opposite is true.

They take with them their trades, their experiences, their passions and their convictions. They will use all these things in new ways. Those who had fished for a living will find themselves fishing for men and women and youth and children. Those who had farmed will come to see that familiar activities like planting, sowing, cultivating, harvesting and threshing contain within themselves profound insights into the mystery of the gospel. Those who tended sheep will now tend God's people; those who kept house will teach others how to practice hospitality for Christ. The artisan who fashions a bowl, cup, or plate or weaves a cloth creates something beautiful for God.

Each year, our high school seniors are invited to participate in the Footsteps of Faith program. Throughout the year, these seniors study the life and letters of Paul with our Lake Fellows. Then, they are invited go on a two week pilgrimage in the footsteps of Paul in Turkey, Greece and Rome. The goal of the experience is not to make each one of the participants into a future preacher but to help each one of these youth, before they go off to college, think deeply about how they will live out their calling to follow Jesus. Each one of us has a calling; we are called to use our gifts to glorify God and serve Jesus Christ by being useful servants in the world. We fulfill that calling as mechanics, computer programmers, salespersons, homemakers, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, teachers, medical professionals, attorneys, neighbors, singers and government leaders.

Frederick Buechner's now famous and often quoted definition of vocation is: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, p. 95). Ellen Echols Purdum adds her comment on this definition:

"... somewhere inside of us lies a deep spring of gladness of which we are becoming aware. You may have experienced this gladness as a ripple, or as a sudden, overflowing gush, or as a slow and steady drip, or even as one single cool drop. It feels life-giving and liberating... Pay attention to those ripples and gushes, drips and drops. Trust them and follow them. See where they take you..." (Sermon, "Mary and Martha and the Myers-Briggs," printed in *Awakened to a Calling*, edited by Svenmungsén and Wiginton, p. 24).

When Jonah hears the call, there is no deep spring of gladness. He tries to flee as far as he can to get away from God. Even on the open sea, Jonah finds he cannot flee from God. He learns the truth of the 139th Psalm, which was our lesson last week. "Where can I go from your spirit? ..If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." God holds him fast through the storm. God holds him fast in the sea. God holds him fast in the belly of the whale.

Sometimes we say, "no," before we say, "yes." Sometimes, we run to a far country before we come to our senses. Sometimes, we hide in the darkness before we find the light. In all these places, God holds us and calls to us, "Follow me." In spite of all the roadblocks we put in the way, God calls us still.

The book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, is a powerful history of the 1970 murder of Vietnam veteran Henry Marrow in his hometown of Oxford, North Carolina. It is the history of the brutal murder of a young black man at the hands of a white man and his two grown sons. It is the history of the injustice that was perpetrated by an all-white jury at a trial that set the killers free in spite of the clear evidence of their guilt. It is the story of a whole town coming to grips with massive social change growing out of a history of racial oppression and injustice. It is also the author's own personal spiritual and emotional pilgrimage that led him to become an historian. The author, Tim Tyson, is the son of a Methodist minister in the town of Oxford during these years of struggle.

When the family moved to Wilmington so that his father could take a call to a new church, young Tim Tyson struggled to make the transition. He became disillusioned by the racism of the society, the assassinations of public figures and the political upheaval of Watergate. He became alienated from school and emotionally distant from his family. By the time he was 16, he decided to drop out of high school and go with two equally alienated older friends to live in a tumble-down farmhouse in a remote area of northeastern North Carolina.

On the night he took off, Tim left a note for his parents saying that he loved them but the time had come for him to leave the hypocrisy of society and form his own commune with his friends. He took the bus to a town 27 miles from the community of Flat Branch where the farmhouse was located. He was planning to walk the rest of the way. His father found the note and drove to find Tim. He found him on the road and offered to drive him the rest of the way to the farmhouse. Tim's mom and dad knew that their son had made his decision and there was no way to force him to come home. Letting him go must have been one of the hardest things they had ever had to do.

When they reached the farmhouse, his dad gave him a gallon bucket of peanut butter, several dozen pairs of socks and an old back and white TV set. Outside the car, Tim and his father wrapped their arms around each other and stood there for quite a while. Tyson writes, "He laid his thick hand on my head and thanked God for giving him this fine son...and asked Him to stand by me in the days and years to come. Then he pressed into my hand the Bible that Jack Tyson [his dad] had given him on the day he'd left home, and drove away." (p. 279) Like Jonah, God's call was upon that boy's life. God had not

abandoned him. Like the story of Jonah, there is more to Tim Tyson's story. We will hear that story next Sunday. Today, I want us to know that, try as we might, there is no way to flee from God's call. God's hand is upon our lives. Sometimes, like the disciples, we are quick to say, "yes;" sometimes, like Jonah, we spend a lot of time running from God and crying, "no." Sometimes it takes a lifetime for us to come to our senses.

I do not know where you are in listening to *God's call in your life, somewhere perhaps between the "no" and the "yes."* I do know this: God will not give up until God has you where you need to be and you discover that where you find yourself is where your heart says you most want to be.