

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
Jonah 3:1-5,10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

The invitation changes everything.

That invitation changed everything. Jonah was content to be a prophet to his beloved Israel. He was a patriot as well as a prophet, perhaps even too much of a patriot. Sure, they didn't always listen, but they were his people, and he loved them. He was content to continue calling out to his people on God's behalf. But that invitation changed everything.

"Follow me!" God called. "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah didn't like this assignment. He was a prophet, yes, and prophets were to go where the Lord assigned them, but, please, Nineveh, that was just not fair. Nineveh was a great city, a busy and affluent trading hub, and the soon-to-be-capital of Assyria, the nation that would destroy Israel in 722BC. It was already clear at Jonah's time, about fifty years before Israel's destruction, that Assyria was a threat. And now God wanted Jonah to go and preach to them!

There were two major problems. First, Jonah was a patriot. He did not want Israel's enemies to be saved, to be forgiven, to be blessed by God. Their blessing would certainly mean Israel's bane. Second, what were the odds that an enemy people of a great city would listen to a backwoods Israelite preacher roaming their streets, calling them wicked, and telling them to repent. And, oh yeah, he would also have to tell them their gods were good-for-nothing hunks of stone and wood and that they had to turn to the only true God, the God of Israel, Yahweh—you know, the God of that tiny little nation of unsophisticated people that Assyria would soon smush under its thumb like an ant.

But you know what the funny thing is? Just as the invitation of our Lord moved the unwilling Jonah to do what He steadfastly refused to do, our Lord moved the might Ninevites humbly to seek His mercy. Nineveh repented, and God repented, that is, He turned His thoughts and feelings about this people from judgment to mercy, from anger to love, from condemnation to justification. And Jonah kept whining, but how many miracles should we expect of God at one time?

That invitation changed everything. John had been arrested. Surely the spiritual renewal that had begun would peter out now. But no, while many saw John's arrest as a warning, one Man saw it as His invitation to fill the void and more. "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" It was a similar message to John's, yet different in an important way. This prophet did not point to anyone. This prophet proclaimed fulfilled what John proclaimed forthcoming.

One day He passed along the Sea of Galilee. It is hard to tell if He had been preaching that day. If He had been, Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, would have been the last to notice. They had work to do. They had hard work to do. They were fishing. No, this wasn't for-fun fishing. This was fish-or-die fishing. Worms, water, and fish—that was life for them. Then someone called out to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Was this some sort of salesman? What kind of greeting was this? Here's where we'd expect the questions. "Who are you?" "Follow you where?" "Why should we follow you?" "How will we make a living?" "What will we do with our boat and nets?" "Oh yeah, and who are you again?" Here's where we would expect questions, but we don't find any. While Jonah had to be swallowed by a giant fish in order to follow God's invitation, Simon and Andrew immediately leave behind fish and everything they have to follow.

That invitation changed everything. James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, were in their boat mending nets. It had been a long day, no doubt, since the nets needed to be mended. They

too were fishermen, it seems. They were inheriting dad's business. Life wasn't too bad. They didn't have to scrounge out their own path in life. Their father had worked hard to make one for them. Sure, it was hard work, but it was work that put fish on the table and a roof over their head. They could support families and have a little extra to spend on themselves. Life wasn't too spectacular, but it was reliable, and what more can a man ask for, especially in tough times. But then it happened. A voice called out, "*Follow me!*" And they jumped out of the boat and swam to Jesus, leaving dad behind with the hired servants. Sure, Zebedee might have had some thoughts about all this, perhaps critical thoughts, but sometimes someone more important than dad calls you. Sometimes God says, "*Follow me!*" And when God calls, we jump, even out of boats.

The apostles followed Jesus, sometimes gladly, and sometimes with a little grumbling. They followed, sometimes with bold strides of faith, sometimes stumbling in doubt. Eleven of them were martyred, killed for their faith. The twelfth was exiled. They followed Jesus through death to eternal life. And as they followed, they, like Jonah, were spurred on by the Lord's invitation, which was greater than their fear and doubt and unwillingness.

That invitation changes everything, and we are invited today. "*Come, follow me!*" the Savior speaks. We dare not think this invitation is easy. Jonah was sent to preach to those who would crush his people. The apostles abandoned boats, nets, and dad. They were called to an uncomfortable existence, tinged with doubt yet filled with the grandest promises, narrow and rocky, yet leading to the place where sorrow and suffering have no home. St. Paul urges us on this way in our second lesson, but warns us that following this invitation involves a seismic change in perspective. This invitation does not simply change our lives; this invitation is a way of life. Everything becomes secondary to the voice of Jesus, calling us through His Word to follow Him.

Our Savior calls us to follow Him. There is no greater honor we could receive than this invitation, but it is not all wine and roses. Jesus calls us to the narrow and rocky road. As He took up His cross for us, we may at times be called to bear crosses for Him. At times, following Him may cause problems with family members who've chosen different paths or want to knock you off yours. You may have to leave dad sitting in the boat with the hired hands, so to speak. You may lose opportunities because of your faith, when you are unwilling to cut corners, deceive, or cheat your way to joy and comfort. You may suffer pain and sorrow beyond what your friends and neighbors experience, as Satan works all the harder to topple the faithful, since the faithless are already his. There may be days when you boldly confess your Lord like St. Peter, who is Simon from our text. There may be days when you fail your Lord like St. Peter. I pray, whatever the case, you always turn to your Lord for forgiveness like St. Peter. By God's grace, you will encounter some who receive your faith with joy and beg you to take them to this Jesus. By the devil's wicked devices, you will encounter some who mock your Jesus as the soldiers did before they nailed Him to the cross for their sins and ours. Like the apostles, your walk with Jesus will have its mountaintops and valleys, its Good Fridays and Easter Sundays.

Through all of this, hear the Savior's invitation and know that it is greater than your fear, doubt, and unwillingness. Hear your Savior's invitation and follow Him while there is still time, while the gates of heaven still stand open, before those who did not follow are shut out. Don't trade eternal joy and comfort for passing joy and comfort now. Follow Jesus, for He died and rose for you do just that. Follow Him and know that, while the directions to the feast may take you on a narrow and rocky path, the feast is what the invitation is all about, and the feast is not far off. The Savior calls. Whether you are in a pew, a boat, or the belly of a giant fish, forget whatever you are doing, jump into the water, and follow Him. Amen.