

"Want or Call?"

Jonah 1:1-17

This week we begin our summer-long journey into the Minor Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The Minor Prophets are the twelve shorter books in the Hebrew Bible ascribed to various prophets. Each had a specific message to the people of their time. Each had a mission to carry out. Each had a place in the work of God in the world. There is a lot we can learn from these texts if we allow ourselves to look into the books and dive in.

I chose to do a sermon on the Minor Prophets because they are set of the Hebrew Bible that is often ignored or simply glossed over. I believe they are a hidden treasure of the Bible, waiting for us to take a look. Some of the stories we know well. Some of the stories we may have never heard before. Regardless, these stories represent a decent amount of the Bible that we should be exposed to at some point as our time as Christians.

We'll begin our journey with the book of Jonah. Many of us have heard of the story of Jonah where he was swallowed up in the belly of a fish and then went and told Nineveh to repent and turn to God. This story is one that is told in Sunday Schools and Vacation Bible Schools. We usually learn it as children. However, we never go much deeper than the simple story. There is a lot to learn from this short story of a book.

The major theme present in the book of Jonah is the idea that all people can be restored to God and all people can experience God in their lives. This is a theme that we experience throughout the story of our faith. Christ proclaimed a message of restoration and renewal that we can experience to this day in our time and place. This shows that the message of our faith has been constant since the beginning of our story and that our faith story will be with us for long into the future.

Jonah's work was to share this message to the city of Nineveh in Assyria. The Assyrians were a people that were in need of repenting, for they had pretty much wiped out the northern tribes of Israel and scattered the population. They were a people that were feared by the Israelites. Here were a people that practiced a form of genocide.

From Jonah's perspective, God must have completely fallen off his rocker. God was telling Jonah to dive right in to heart of the beast and proclaim a message of hope. You have to consider what Jonah must have thinking in this story. If anything, Jonah probably believed that God should wipe out the Assyrians like they had done to the Israelites. It would have also felt like a mission to failure, for why would the Assyrians listen to a man who was a part of the people that they conquered?

I believe what Jonah experiences in the first chapter of the book is something that we experience today in our faith. We have this sense of where God wants us, yet we know that what God calls us to do may not be what we want to do. Jonah experiences a story of struggle, of fleeing God and getting as far as possible from the people that he was supposed to serve. How often have we ran from God when we felt that we were heading in the wrong direction?

I believe this story of Jonah, in the very beginning of his story, is a story about the difference between doing what we are called to do, and doing what we want to do. Many times, these two things go against each other, yet what we are called to do and what we want to do should be the same thing.

Just recently, I experienced this situation in my personal life. As I've discussed before, I believe I am called to be a part of this congregation as we seek out our vision to serve God in our community. Yet a challenge to this call came in the form of a phone call from a dear friend and mentor.

Last week as I was wrapping up school, I received a phone call from my former advisor at McPherson College. He informed me that there was an opening in the position of campus pastor and instructor of Philosophy and Religion. He was encouraging me to apply for the job as he felt that I would be a good fit, being a recent graduate and having some experience working in various ministry settings.

On the surface, this seems like a perfect opportunity. It would be a chance to give back to my school that made me the person that I am. It would be a chance to grow further. However, the cost of following this want would be rather high.

For the past 6 years I have been working towards becoming a pastor in the United Methodist Church. My main goal has been serving the church of Jesus Christ. Time and again I have worked hard to get to the point where I am now. Yet to follow the want of being a campus pastor would turn against everything that I have worked for. While the opportunity may seem great, it's not what God is calling me to at this point in my life.

It's a rough situation. Yet what I need to remain focused on is what God wants in my life. The opportunity to serve at McPherson College will probably come again in the future. I don't want to be a Jonah and completely run away from the call of God. I think the time to serve God is now, here at Faith Church. I know what I am called to do and it is critical that I remain focused on the call of God first and foremost. If I walked away from Faith Church, I would be missing out on the huge blessings I could experience in my life.

I think I am fortunate in this situation because what I want to do and what I am called to do line up pretty well. It's a blessing to be in such a position, it truly is. I think it is difficult for me to fully appreciate where I am because God has worked wonders in my life getting me here. Yet while it is difficult to comprehend the blessing, I can still be thankful for the opportunity.

I think the time is coming for Faith Church to answer the call of God and discern what that call looks like. I believe we are in a unique and wonderful position to be where we can take the time to learn what God wants us to do and find a way of fulfilling that call in the world. We have to remain focused that what we are called to do is what we want to do. I think there is a hurdle in reaching the point of matching both.

Jonah in the bible fled the call of God, and he ended up in the belly of a fish. Now I'm not saying that if we run from the call of God we'll be swallowed up the great fish of Glendo Reservoir, but I think we limit the blessings that we can receive in our lives. Jonah faced the struggle of running from his calling and he ran into some great difficulty in running from that call.

I believe that Jonah recognized the mistake that he had made. For if we look at chapter 2 of the book, we see this great Psalm of Thanksgiving that Jonah gives from the belly of the fish. The text states that (Read Jonah 2)

Here following this psalm, Jonah is put upon the dry land. He goes to Nineveh and proclaims the message that God had for the city. The city responds and recognizes their evil ways. They turn to God and believe in the message that Jonah was proclaiming. They do what God wants them to do and spares them from a great calamity.

Now the end of the story is interesting. Jonah sees what happens, and actually is a little upset. He storms off into the desert and pretty much lets God have it. But do you see the ridiculousness of Jonah's claim? He saying that he knew God was gracious, and he was upset that God spared Nineveh. Jonah wanted the Assyrians to face punishment for their past actions. There is a sense of justice that Jonah feels goes unmentioned in this passage.

How often have we gone about our work and seen another person benefit when in the past they have done things wrong? It's like following the call of God constantly and doing everything that you were supposed to do and receiving nothing for it. It's a frustration that people experience constantly in their lives.

I believe that we need to follow the groundwork that God lays out. We should be glad that we serve a God that is willing to extend grace and peace to a people that wiped out God's own people. Staying in the past and questioning the call of God for us will get us nowhere.

I think that Jonah should have taken the energy that it took to be angry and pushed it towards recognizing the blessing that he was for the city of Nineveh. It was through Jonah working for God that the city was saved. Jonah was a part of a bigger picture, a picture greater than himself. Sometimes in our perseverance we forget the blessing that we have been for people. We shouldn't focus on the negative.

I think that we should realize that in following our call that we can be a blessing for others. We shouldn't focus on the negative, but rather we should focus on the grace of God that we can extend to the people we can help. We need to work towards recognizing the call of God and making that call of God what we want. It's not easy, but I believe we can work towards that goal of making God's call a strong part of our spiritual lives.

I believe we are the start of a great beginning at Faith Church. It's time for us to answer the call of God. It is time for us to make the call of God our own. Let us not be Jonah, but be joyful that we can be a instrument of blessing for people. We don't know the extent of the blessings we can be a part of, so let us join in the process together, and be ready for the great blessings that God can extend. Amen.