

“RELUCTANT PREACHERS”

(Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5, 10)

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[PROPS NEEDED: My cell phone & someone to call it during the sermon]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 6-13-10]

-I-

1. [BOTH Services:] Read Text: (MSG at 9:30; NRSV at 11am): Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5, 10 and Pray.

2. The story of Jonah is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Not only is it a humorous and entertaining story, but also because it contains many things that parallel the stories of our own lives [Somewhere in the middle of this dialogue, my PARTNER CALLS MY CELL PHONE, and I answer it]...

A-...Um, excuse me just a second, I've got to take this... *“Hi... Yeah, but I'm kind of busy right now. Can you call back in about 20 minutes? Well, I'm preaching so you'd better make it 30!.... Ok. Talk to you then... Bye.”*

B-Sorry, but have you ever gotten a call that you just *have* to take?

1-Maybe from your spouse? Your boss? Your kids?

2-Well, what if it was a call from God? ...*Would* you take it?

C-Well, whether or not we've recognized them as such or not, we've probably *all* received “calls” from God in one form or another over the course of our lives.

1-Most of our have been “calls” to “ordinary” things like getting married or becoming part of a church, or serving in the nursery or in a mission ministry of some sort

2-But there ARE times that we experience *extraordinary* calls from God.

3. Today, I want to talk about one of these that (I'll grant) not ALL Christians experience *firsthand*, but it's one that we're all *affected* by: ...the “call” to full-time Christian service through God's church.

A-You see, within the general ministry of *all* Christians, God calls and raises up *some* persons to be leaders – to inspire and challenge us all forward towards a goal, and help equip us to get there.

B-That's essentially the job of myself, Pastor Jim, Pastor Cindy and Pastor Peter (and the rest of the staff): we're not here to do ministry *for* you, but to help equip *you* to carry out God's calling in *your* life in our world and community. ¹

4. Now, to help us see what I'm talking about, I want to tell you the story of two “Reluctant Preachers,” and how this “call” to full-time Christian service affected their lives – one of these was the biblical character of **Jonah**, and the other... is **myself**.

-II-

5. I've come to believe that Jonah's life and story is – in many ways – a mirror of my own:
- A–Jonah was a devout Jew -- keeping all the customs, attending all his religious duties as a good Jewish person would.
- B–And in many ways, the younger years of my own life were very much like this, as well:
6. I was born into a loving, God-fearing family in which my parents imparted to both my sister and myself the importance of a strong spiritual life through their teaching and example, and through our faithful attendance at College Park 1st UMC (College Park, GA) every week.
- A–And while I understood the importance of God and church as a child, it wasn't until my early teens, while attending our UM youth camp (Camp Glisson, Dahlonega), that I gave my heart and life to Jesus and began my personal walk with God.
- B–I continued to grow with the Lord as a teenager, heavily involved as a member and eventual leader of my church youth group, our youth choir and handbell choir, even learning about my Methodist heritage on a trip to England in 1984 as a member of The Methodist Festival Choir.²
7. I went off to college as a History Major at LaGrange College (GA), and there God gave me an even greater vision and opportunity for lay ministry as the President and song-leader of our “Wesley Fellowship” student group on campus.
- A–On a trip to Europe as a Rotary International exchange student at the University of Oslo (Norway) in 1986, I was able to share my faith with students from 65 other countries.
- B–Back home, my family's involvement in a new UM church (North Fayette) encouraged me to pursue becoming a Certified Lay Speaker in our tradition, and in 1987 I experienced a deepening encounter with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, resulting in a new passion for God's word, prayer, and the sharing of my faith.
- C–I began to sense God calling me to blend my Christian witness with a love of the law, so upon college graduation in 1988, I entered law school, intent on becoming a “Christian lawyer” (if there is such a thing!).
8. Now remember that up to this point, like Jonah, I'd worked hard to serve God as a devout believer within the “general call” of all Christians, keeping all the customs and religious duties as any good Christian would.

-III-

9. But Verse 1 of today's scripture says that “*the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai...*” and called him to a special task/responsibility of going to Nineveh (the capital of the great Assyrian Empire) to call them to repentance.³

A--Yet, despite this call, notice what Jonah did in Verse 3: “*Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship there [to take him to] Tar'shish.*”

1--Now, understand that Joppa was located on the Mediterranean coast, Nineveh was in what's now Iraq, and Tar'shish was in what's now Spain.

2--So, instead of heading east to Ninevah, Jonah took a ship bound for the most western edge of the known world-- totally *opposite* the direction of God's call.

B--In other words, when faced with a call from God for his life, Jonah did exactly what I and many of us tend to do: we “*flee from the presence of the Lord*” (after all, some would argue that law is about as “opposite” as religion as one can get!)

1--Oh, I was doing all the right, “religious” things, thinking I was going to serve God in the legal profession – but deep down, my soul was not at peace.

2--I knew God was calling me to something more than active lay ministry (as important as that is).

3--And this was something that was confirmed over and over by friends in college, fellow law students, my pastor while in Virginia, and even by my then fiancé Trish who told me, “*Brian, either God's not talking, or you're not listening.*”

C--You see, I began to see that all my active church work was merely my way of getting on a ship bound for Tar'shish – that if I could just “appease” the Lord with my service as a lay person, then maybe He wouldn't ask anything else. ⁴

10. But you know, I'm glad we serve a God who doesn't give up on us easily.

A--True... at the time, I just wanted God to leave me alone, but just as the Lord sent a whale to swallow Jonah and get him back on track, so the Lord used other people (like my pastor, friends, and fiancé) to help me see that I wasn't going to be *truly at peace* until I answered His call to full-time Christian service.

B--And when I quit running from that call in June of 1989 – when I stopped giving excuses and trying to rationalize it away – I found a new peace, joy, and excitement in life.

C--And I've never regretted it since then. Sure, like Jonah, I've had my share of challenges, frustrations, and even pity-parties, but I *know* I'm where God wants me to be.

–IV–

11. So, some of you are thinking, “*So what's all of this got to do with ME?*”

A--Well, just this: **If God can call “Reluctant Preachers” like Jonah and myself to full-time Christian service, then He can call YOU, too!**

B—And bear in mind that as Wesleyan Christians, we believe it's a call that's NOT confined to *young men*, despite any prejudice we may have learned to the contrary:

1--Jonah was middle-aged when God spoke to him about going to Nineveh --
Moses was 80, and Abraham was 75 when they heard God's call. ⁵

2—And the very first person to ever preach about the resurrection of Jesus was not a *man*, but a *woman* – Mary Magdalene after she left the empty tomb. ⁶

3—What's more is that the New Testament records that Phoebe and Priscilla (two *women*) were important pastors in the early Christian church. ⁷

C—Remember, also, that “full-time Christian service” is not necessarily a call to “pastor a church” like I do: ...God calls some to be Evangelists, Music or Youth or Children's Ministers (like Pastor Cindy), missionaries, Christian technology consultants, Christian educators and seminary professors, military chaplains, and other things.

12. And young people, ...some of you are at the point in school where you're starting to think about what career you want to pursue for your future.

A—Well, I want to invite you to *seriously* consider full-time Christian service as an option.

1—I know people may not think it's as glamorous as some other careers.

2—But, there's NO other organization or institution on earth that has the potential to touch and shape the course of human history *more* than the Christian church.

B—So, if you want to be a part of profession that can make a *difference* in the world like no other profession (more than doctors or lawyers or judges), then please prayerfully consider full-time Christian service.

—V—

13. Now, I know that *most* of you aren't going to jump up after this service today and sign up for this kind of career – as I said earlier, God doesn't call ALL Christians to this.

A—But I DO believe that God IS calling *some* of you to at least *consider* it.

B—Now, you may already be serving God in our church in some great ways – but deep down, you may just be using these as your way of sailing on a ship bound for Tar'shish.

C—And today, God is inviting you to be honest with yourself, to quit running, and listen to see if He's calling *your name* to answer *His* call to full-time Christian service.

14. I'm going to end as I always do by offering a prayer.

A–But following that, I want to open our altar and invite any of you who’re feeling God’s “tug” to come and pray about this.

1–Maybe it’s not even a prayer for yourself – maybe you have a friend or family member that you’ve sensed has this “call,” but they’re ignoring it.

2–If so, I want *you* to come and pray for *them* and for what God wants *you* to do to help them answer it.

B–And for those of you who’re wrestling with this and need further advice, my door (and that of Jim P, Cindy, and Peter) is open for you to come meet with any of us over the next few days or weeks, so that help you discern just what it is that you’re experiencing..

C–God is calling “reluctant preachers” like Jonah, myself, and perhaps... YOU. The question is: Are you listening? And what are you going to do about it?

15. [PRAYER: *“Through our baptism, you’ve called ALL Christians to be ‘ministers’ for you. But we’ve heard today that out of the general call of all Christians, you call some of us also to specialized roles of leadership, vision, and equipping for and with the body of Christ.*

So, speak to our hearts today about your call to full-time Christian service, whether it be to become an ordained minister, a local pastor, a youth, children’s, or music minister, a seminary professor, chaplain, or whatever full-time Christian work you lead us to. For those who’re running from that call today: catch up with them and don’t let them go until they turn and answer you. For those who’ve had a ‘seed’ planted today, water and nurture it, that others might bring those seeds to fruition. For those who set forward in faith and decide to answer this particular call today, give them passion and zeal for your kingdom so that they can make a difference in our world. And for those who know others who we feel are being called to this kind of ministry, give us wisdom to know how to be the ‘whales’ of their lives, encouraging them to respond to/answer that call.

Lord, we love you, and want to serve you -- whether as laity or as full-time Christian ministers. But help us to discern WHERE you want us to serve, and not try to run or give excuses. And we pray all of this in the name of your son Jesus. Amen.”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Having a career in full-time Christian service, you see, is NOT a call to special “privilege” with God, but to the special “responsibility” of what Paul calls “*equipping the saints*” (each individual Christian) for ministry (Read Ephesians 4:11-13).
2. On this trip I was fascinated by the history, passion, and zeal of John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists, and began to appreciate why I felt so “at home” as a Methodist Christian, and felt led to help bring renewal to my own faith tradition.
3. As I would soon learn for myself, Jonah discovered that as important as the “general call” of God was, it often is not all that God wants out of us – God was calling him (and me) to something MORE.
4. In effect I was giving excuses and rationalizations: “*Lord, I’ll do anything you ask, but just don’t ask me to be a preacher. After all, I can be a more effective witness and reach more people as a lay person, right?*”
5. Read Exodus 7:7 and Genesis 12:4
6. Read Luke 24:9-10.
7. Read Romans 16:1 and Acts 18:18 & 26, Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19, 2 Timothy 4:19.