

The Third  
Sunday after  
the Epiphany

The Rev.  
**Stephanie  
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Mark 1:14-20 Epiphany 3B 2012

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Get up! Go! The time is short... Follow me---immediately!

Why is God in such a hurry, why is God's summoning so urgent? Here we are plodding along in our lives with great care and God bursts in with all of these disruptive demands. I mean, I think we all want God in our lives, but does God have to be so intrusive?

Do I really have to go to Nineveh, is the time really so short--do I have to follow you right now Jesus? Can I take a few days to see if that's a good move for me?

What *do* we do when God's power and purpose breaks in to the midst of our daily world?

How do we respond when we realize that God calls us into a whole new understanding of life—lives where our old way of being no longer makes any sense—new lives where even things we thought were important like wealth or social status just seem empty?

Apparently it's as simple as just saying yes! Ultimately to resist God's call, as Jonah's journey testifies, throws us into the belly of the whale—a strong metaphor for darkness and chaos. The belly of the whale is that place to which our fear or stubbornness leads us—it is a place where our pride sends us to die a futile and unnecessary spiritual death.

And in the heart of darkness, chaos, futility and death is precisely where we find ourselves when we separate ourselves from God's purposes. But why does God demand so much? What's in it for us?

As people in the western world we have become so geared to individualism and self determination that we fail to comprehend that we are imprisoned by it. When God interrupts our lives with the notion that there is more to a life of faith than what we do here on Sundays we can find that hard to hear.

And even when we do hear some new stirring within that is prompting us to risk something of ourselves for God's purposes, we find ourselves trapped in the prison of an overbooked, overscheduled life that has no room for improvisation; no time for creative interplay with the quickening that seems to want to bring life to a part of our souls that we didn't even realize was dying.

Or we hear the urgent call as we are busily tending our nets, whatever our modern net might be, but what it stirs within us is resistance or fear. God can't be calling me---I'm not good enough, smart enough, spiritual enough...insert your fear or insecurity here

But what we fail to comprehend when we are bound by time or insecurity is that when Jesus comes to us and says "Follow me" he is offering the gift of *true freedom*.

As one commentator says, "The Gospel's call always summons us to perfect freedom. *Always*. Yet the freedom to which Jesus calls each and every one of us—in light of the human preference to bondage—can be a haunting, terrifying freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Have *you* ever felt that hunger to discover a deeper purpose or meaning for your life stirring within your breast? If you have, you need to know that what you are really hearing is God's call. And we all have a purpose you know...

*[It was here that I confessed to the congregation that I had changed my sermon after reading it the night before. In the original version I had offered sweeping tribute to the likes of MLK Jr, Mandela, Mother Teresa, all of whom are worthy of mention, but I thought staying out there I that rare air just left me with a sermon that I thought was just "crap". So sorry for the crudeness, but I thought what I had offered previously best fit that description because it failed to honor the inspirational ministries of so many people who are in our churches and most likely was the kind of sermon that just kept people in their pews because who could aspire to such heights---so on with the sermon...]*

One of my favorite stories of how someone stepped out of their feelings of unworthiness and realized their call happened while I was at seminary. He was not a fellow seminarian, he was not a learned professor or counselor, but his impact on the seminary community was huge.

While I was there I had occasion to meet a man whose ministry was to buy cars that were on the edge let's say, and he would repair them and sell them to seminarians for between \$80-\$150 dollars each. When the student's time at seminary was up, those who had the cars could choose to return them or take them with them. It was an extraordinary gift to countless people.

<sup>1</sup> Hans King Ohmeg, *Synthesis*, October 15, 2006.

I had heard about the "seminary car guy" but it wasn't until I drove a friend to his garage to pick up one of these cars that I just by chance had a brief conversation with him.

I asked him how he started doing this and he said that he had really wanted to do something, some ministry that would make a difference, but that all he was really good at was repairing cars and wasn't it too bad that that wasn't any kind of ministry!

But thankfully someone helped him to realize how his passion for tinkering with old cars could in fact be a very great offering to God's people. He did not have to be a preacher, run the stewardship program, or even visit shut ins to serve the church and the world---he only had to be willing to see and believe that the best of who he was and the gift that he had to offer was worthy of being offered as a gift to God.

The most radical decision he made was to take God with him out of the church on Sunday and realize that his passion for old cars could be a love offering to God. His "hobby" became a loving sacrament to a whole community by simply offering to God that part of himself that he loved the most.

We are all called to find that place where our lives, our joy or skill or passion can intersect with God's desire to love our neighbor.

This is what is at the heart of Jesus' insistent, urgent call; it is simply this: that through us the people with whom we are in community might learn of God's love, compassion and mercy. And the showing forth of this love can take many forms.

If you are running a homeless shelter or volunteering for Dr's without borders and you are miserable, but you do it because you think it is the kind of noble deed God desires, you probably haven't found your call.

But if you are most joyful balancing books or throwing parties, or working on the church properties, or doing advocacy work, or working with children, or doing dishes---well chances are God can inspire you to do wonderful things for God's people if you offer the best of your joy as a gift.

There will be others who are called to seminary, to Dr's without Borders, or Homeless shelters---not more inspired people, not more worthy people, not smarter, kinder or more important people, just people for whom those things offer joy and purpose.

We all have a role to play and when we say yes to God the ordinary things of our lives catch fire and even the most mundane tasks are given new vibrancy and depth.

We don't have to fully understand God's call to us, we don't even have to grasp the full reality of what God's summons means to our lives---these first disciples certainly didn't understand it at first.

You see, we don't need to worry about what happens after we say yes to God---all we have to do is trust.

This call to serve God simply asks us to take that first little step. To step out of our feelings that we have nothing to offer or that we are just too busy and to trust that God can transform *whatever* we have into a gift for God's world.

At the heart of being a follower of Christ is this acknowledgement that God's greatest purpose for each and every one of us is realized when we learn to live not for ourselves, but for God and for God's people.

God's call does disrupt our lives, there is no doubt. We all have places of comfort, perhaps even places we hide, or truths we are too frightened to confront. But just as God calls us to service, God also restores us to wholeness.

None of the people we read about in our scripture are ever paragons of virtue and goodness. They are typically broken, frightened, or groping for survival---just like all of us.

But God calls to us anyway and when we say yes God can use our fractured little lives to extraordinary effect.

With Moses' yes God frees a people from bondage and transforms a stuttering murderer into a great deliverer. With Samuel's yes he turns a little boy into a wise and mighty leader of Israel. Even with Jonas' begrudging surrender, God turns an angry curmudgeon into a reluctant, but effective prophet.

When we hear God's call and we follow in the way of Christ---life changes-- there is no doubt.

But, we will still encounter joy and frustration, we will still know both happiness and sorrow ---and sometimes, the very same day will share our greatest triumphs as well as our deepest failures.

None of this is unique to those who love God; it is the stuff of life. The only difference between those who have heeded God's call and those who haven't, is that when we lay our head on our pillows each night, we know that no matter what has transpired though the day we are doing what we do best and becoming the people that God has formed us to be.

A call to follow leads us all on a sacred and tumultuous journey---a journey that we are invited to share with one another. What a joy to be given the opportunity to play a part in making God's love for the world realized...realized through and in the very ordinary people that Jesus has invited to simply follow him. Amen.

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