

Epiphany 3 January 24 2021

As you all might recall, I've been a little obsessed by the monoliths that began showing up late last year, first in the canyon lands of Utah, then all over the nation and the world, and finally even right here in Vermont. Well, of course, monoliths are so last year and now the rage that has broken the internet is photos of our own senator, Bernie Sanders, with his mittens at the inauguration of President Biden. Bernie in his mittens has been showing up everywhere; for example here is a shot of him in a prominent place in Barre that my son-in-law James Garrett found:



It turns out these famous mittens were knitted for Bernie by Jen Ellis, a second grade teacher in Chittenden County. She's had thousands of offers and inquiries about making more mittens, but she said her calling is to teach young children and she has no interest in going into the mitten making business. She added, in an interview on Vermont Public Radio,

that if anything, she hopes people take the simple lesson that it is a good thing to do something nice for someone else. A good lesson from a second grade teacher and a good lesson for us all to heed.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, this morning in your word we hear of your call to your people; may our hearts be open to your call that we may do you will. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

When I started at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, we had a professor of Hebrew Scriptures named George Landis. The center of his scholarly work was the Book of Jonah, which is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible. I was extremely disdainful of this, thinking that an academic career should be something more lofty, a pursuit of the beautiful prophecies of Isaiah, or a critical examination of the intensity of Jeremiah, or perhaps a literary analysis of the stories of Genesis, and this opinion was shared by many of the other seminary students. It was only after years of study that I realized just how deep the 639 words of Jonah are: the Book of Jonah is a shining example of that saying “good things come in small packages,” and I found that rather than wasting his time, Professor Landis was really like a skilled jeweler, finding incredible value in something that is small, yes, but absolutely packed with an enormous value.

In the Season of Epiphany, we consider our Baptismal ministry and the call we have to live in the fullness of Christ and to serve in the Name of Christ, we hear two stories about calling from the scriptures. This first is from the Book of Jonah, which as I mentioned is the shortest book of the 66 that make up the Hebrew Bible. The other story of calling is from Mark's Gospel. I think that it is interesting to look at these two scriptural passages and also to compare them to what is going on in our lives as well.

Most of us are familiar with Jonah and the whale, specifically as the one who was swallowed by the whale and vomited up on the shore three days later. What we usually do not think about is how Jonah ended up in the belly of the whale to begin with. Jonah seems to have been a relatively obscure prophet from Galilee in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the common era, and when the call from God came to him to go to Nineveh, the great capitol of the powerful Assyrian Empire and to prophesy against them, instead of heading off northeast and across the mountains and deserts, Jonah runs southwest and jumps on a ship headed across the sea. Basically, Jonah does a 180 on God! So God blows up a storm on the sea, and Jonah confesses to the crew that their lives are in peril because of his disobedience, and so they throw him overboard. But God doesn't want Jonah to perish; so God sends along the whale to swallow Jonah, to preserve his life and later to deliver him back on solid ground. And that's where we join him today, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second*

time, saying ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’” Jonah realizes there’s no way to get out of it this, time, so he goes to Nineveh, but he thinks this is really just a kamikaze mission, to prophesy against a powerful foreign power, and that’s the source of his disobedience and reluctance. But it is important to note what is going on here: first, Jonah is not only the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible, but this is the shortest prophecy in the entire scriptures, only eight words long! “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Also, this prophecy is not directed to the people of Israel, but to a great empire that had often conquered and subjugated the people of Israel, so why should they listen to some pipsqueak foreigner? But listen they do! Everyone, from the king to the lowliest citizen repented and put on sackcloth and did what God commanded. Completely against what Jonah expected, this brief little prophecy is *the most* effective prophecy in the entire Bible! Despite Jonah’s reluctance and disobedience about taking up his call, God works through him anyway to bring about the repentance of all Nineveh, contrary to all expectations.

Unlike the story of Jonah, Jesus’ call of Simon and his brother Andrew, and then of two more brothers, James and John is easy: Jesus proclaims his Good News to the people, again a short message of repentance, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!” that’s it; and then he says “Follow

me,” and as we are told in both instances, *immediately* they dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus. No reluctance, no dilly dallying, not the slightest hint of disobedience, no, they simply leave behind their relatives, their occupations, indeed all that made up their former lives, and they set out with Jesus.

So here we have two very different versions of stories about the call from God. One is about a reluctant prophet and the other of disciples immediately ready to answer the call. What does that mean for us in our day and in our lives? We will continue later in our worship this morning with the prayer asking God to grant us the grace to be ready to answer the call of Jesus, to be like those two sets of brothers there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, ready to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the world. But at the same time we hear about Jonah who in his reluctance ends up fulfilling his mission in a most amazing way. So what are we to make of this as we gather online once more as the people of Good Shepherd on this bitter cold morning in 2021?

I think the story of Jonah tells us about God’s purpose in our calling: as we live into our Baptismal vows, trying the best we can to be faithful, God can use our efforts, even as misguided or as half-hearted as they may be, for the building of the Kingdom of God and for the welfare of God’s people. Jonah walked through the great city of Nineveh and did little more than mumble over and over, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be

overthrown.” He was sure it would have no effect and worried that he would be arrested, tortured and executed. But instead in the most unanticipated way, this prophecy changes the lives of the entire population. But Jonah might well have learned this lesson earlier: no matter what he did, running off in the wrong direction, still God brought him back; no matter if he is thrown into the depths of the sea, God preserves his life in a miraculous way, who would have thought it, to have him swallowed up by a whale!! So I think that the lesson of Jonah is that even in living out our Baptismal vows, we have to expect the unexpected, because God will take our efforts, no matter how wonderful or no matter how insufficient, to fulfill God’s mission and God’s purpose of bringing all the world into God’s amazing, reconciling love.

The other story we heard today, the story of Jesus’ call of some of the first disciples is also important for us. I think that part of the reason these early disciples answer the call so readily and unhesitatingly is that they are called together. This call is not just something that comes to them as individuals, but as part of a group, first as brothers and then as a larger community. These early followers of Jesus were gathered in a community to carry out the mission of Jesus, to proclaim the Good News of salvation and freedom for all people and to join together in building up the Kingdom of God. Later, when Jesus sends them out, they go out two by

two, not alone, so that the call is a shared call, the call of a community to bring others into the reconciling love of God.

This past week we came together as a congregation and together began the process of re-starting, re-igniting God's mission here in Barre as we overcome the pandemic that we lived through this year. This is our call, just as urgent as the call taken up by Jonah and the simple call Jesus makes to the people fishing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in his day, "Follow me!" As a nation, we also turned a corner with a new start by the inauguration of a new Presidential administration, including the historic step of the first female African American, South Asian Vice President, and so as a nation we also will make a new beginning to overcome the pandemic and the social problems it has exposed to us, the need for more equity in our economic system to support the "least of these" as Jesus teaches us, and to overcome the racial inequities of our society which have long festered and kept us from fulfilling the promise of "liberty and justice for all." But at the deepest level, as we will pray together momentarily, God will give us grace, grace to answer this call, grace to proclaim the Good News of Jesus as the Savior to all people. Give us grace to move forward together in our life of faith to service in the Name of the risen Christ to share the divine love we have been graciously given in Christ Jesus. This is God's call to us in mission, a call to work together in mission, first and foremost in our worship and prayers, by following Jesus

and repenting and returning to Jesus when we fall away, by proclaiming in word and example the Good News of God in Christ, by seeking to serve Christ in all persons and loving our neighbors as ourselves and by working for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. This is our call to our Baptismal ministry, our call to live in accordance with God's will for us, to fulfill the purposes which God intends for us. So let us continue now in our worship, continuing to praise God for the deep blessings in our lives and seeking God's grace and strength to move forward in faith, living fully into the love God has so richly showered on our lives. Thanks be to God for this great grace. Amen.