



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 (B)

Following the Call

[RCL] Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Let's begin with a story. Imagine this:

There once was a little Scottish girl whose parents died, and she was sent to live with an aunt in England. Now, she didn't quite fit in—Scottish girl in an English village—but her aunt cared for her, she had a relatively normal life, and she had her own room. Her name was Amelia Pond, and she was seven years old.

In her room, there was a large crack in the wall and sometimes it seemed like she could hear voices coming from it. It scared her a bit, so one night she prayed to Santa Claus—as that was the only benevolent being she actually understood that could do something—that he would send someone to fix the crack in her wall. Suddenly, she heard a loud noise outside. She looked out the window and saw a large blue police call box had smashed the garden shed. She was a rather brave little girl, being Scottish after all, so she decided to take a look.

The call box was on its side and the doors opened up to the sky and light shone out of it, like a big present. And then, human hands emerged over the side of the box, and out came a rather disheveled young man. The young man was quite nice, if a little weird, but he said he would help her with the crack in her room, so she invited him in, as her aunt was out for the night. He was very hungry, but he couldn't remember what he liked to eat, so he told her that since she was Scottish, she could certainly fry up something. She fed him a variety of things and he finally settled on fish sticks with custard as his favorite. Then they got down to business about the crack in her wall.

Once the crack was solved, the man said he had to fix the police call box and that he would come back in five minutes so they could continue their conversation. The little girl knew she hadn't much time, so she raced to her bedroom, got her suitcase out, packed it, got her coat and a warm hat on, and ran out to the garden to sit and wait for the box and the man, who called himself "The Doctor," to come back. She didn't know who he was, but she knew she wanted to go with him.

For those of you who are not familiar with the BBC television show *Doctor Who*, this story is from the first episode of Series 5. It poses the question: What causes a person to leave their normal lives to follow someone they barely know—someone who may actually be viewed by others as dangerous? Although our girl Amy in the Doctor Who episode had more contact with The Doctor than Simon, Andrew, James, and John initially did with Jesus, the situation asks the same questions. The Doctor was offering Amy a bigger world than she knew and Jesus was offering the first disciples something even greater: A call to be fishers of people—to be disciples. Would you take the chance?

The Gospel of Mark's reading doesn't mention that the fishermen had ever heard of Jesus—this was their first encounter. God broke into their ordinary world in an extraordinary way through Jesus' call and that call demanded a response. These guys were established fishermen, they had a trade and maybe a little education. They were nobodies to the aristocracy of the time, but so were 99% of the people. These guys weren't on the margins. Simon Peter was married and his family home in Capernaum later became a center for Operation: Good News. James and John were part of their family's successful fishing business that actually had hired workers. These were not starry-eyed youth, but grown men who were established members of their society. This decision to follow Jesus placed a burden on all their families in one way or another. And yet, they did it. Would we? Do we?

So often, we want to be like Jonah from our Hebrew scripture lesson today. We hear God's call and we turn the other way and run, not walk, as far as we can go. We don't want to disrupt things, especially things that we've worked so hard for. We hear other voices saying that we can't make a difference, so we just need to make do—and we end up with Jonah in the belly of a great fish, out of touch with God and out of touch with our meaning and purpose that God is trying to gift us with. To “repent and believe in the good news,” as Jesus asks us in our Gospel lesson, means that we must turn to God and turn away from all the voices calling us to walk some other path.

What a paradox this is! We are often afraid of God—afraid to follow the very one who is our rock and our salvation. It doesn't feel safe to follow God, does it? Even though it is only *with* God that we know the deepest peace, the greatest protection when we are weary, the healing that makes us whole, the call that echoes in our bones. But even with all those things, we know that God is not tame. We don't know how the Holy Spirit will move. We can't control God and that scares us. Being Christians makes us risk-takers. As the English theologian Charles Raven once said, “Religion involves adventure and discovery and a joy in living dangerously.”

When we hear the words, “The Word of the Lord came to so-and-so...” we know that the person who is experiencing the Word of the Lord is in for a life-changing experience. The word translated as “came” actually means “happened” in Hebrew. Think about how that changes our story of Jonah: “The Word of God happened to Jonah a second time.” Words are important. Jonah knows what to expect when the Word of God happens to a person and they refuse to respond. Jonah ran the other way the first time and ended up in the belly of a huge fish. So, this second time, Jonah responds to God with faithfulness and sets

out to warn the people of Nineveh of their impending destruction. Jonah has learned discipleship the hard way.

Discipleship comes with a cost. It means we might have to give up a comfortable, safe life. It means we turn away from the voices that plague us and follow the One who is leading us to a new way of being—the One that is “happening” to us. We don’t have to worry or fear, though. We bring to God’s service all the gifts and abilities we already have, and we trust that we will always receive new gifts and the power to use them. It is unsettling—we are not used to it. We’re used to maintaining the status quo. But we have this one, beautiful life (that we know of) and it demands that we give it our best, no matter what our age, our education, our economic status, our insecurities—no matter what. And who knows what our best is better than God?

In the first episode of Series 1 of *Doctor Who*, The Doctor invites a girl named Rose to be his traveling companion after a minor adventure. She asks him, “Is it always this dangerous?” and The Doctor replies, “Yes.” She makes excuses and declines his offer. The Doctor steps into the police box, and as it fades away making a distinctive sound, Rose walks away with her boyfriend. Suddenly, they hear it come back. The Doctor peeks his head out and says, “By the way, did I mention, it also travels in time?” and leaves the door open. Rose doesn’t hesitate but runs to the open door... to a new, unexplored life.

Where in your life are you asking God, “Isn’t this dangerous?” Where in your life is God waiting for you to discover the joy in living dangerously? The door is open and God’s hand is extended. Will you follow? Amen.

The Rev. Danae Ashley is an Episcopal priest and licensed marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and the Seattle area and is a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC (www.soulspaseattle.com). Danae uses art, music, drama, poetry, and movement in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual. She has written for Working Preacher, Luther Seminary's Faith+Lead, Sermons That Work, and other publications, as well as being a contributor to podcasts, books, and producing a play about fertility struggle. Danae’s favorite pastimes include reading, traveling with her husband, making sure their rescue dog Cooper is living his best life, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.