

**“HOW SHALL WE RESPOND?”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5; 3:10-4:3; Mark 1:16-20**  
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When I was in Seattle, there was a man in my congregation named Gary. Gary was a CPA and financial planner. One day, I went to visit him with a woman in the church who had been recently widowed. Lois, in her late 70s, had been married to Chet for 56 years. In all that time, she had never had anything to do with the family finances, never even written a check. She was apprehensive about whether she would have enough money to live on, how she would ever learn to deal with the business side of her life. Gary served her tea, listened to her stories and her worries. Patiently, backtracking often, he showed her what her monthly income would be, practiced writing checks, and set up an arrangement whereby Lois would come every week for a couple of months to show him the checks she had written, and he would help her balance her checkbook. Slowly over the two and a half hours we spent there, Lois’s apprehension began to lift. She left Gary’s office, if not confident, then at least reassured that she had a plan that was workable.

A few weeks later, I was having coffee with Gary. He told me that for a few months in college, he had considered entering the ministry, but decided his gifts were financial rather than pastoral. “I guess I just didn’t have the call,” he told me ruefully.

What does it mean to be “called by God?” This section of the lectionary is all about call stories. Last week, Ryan preached about the call of Samuel and then Nathaniel. This week, we have the stories of Jonah, and James and John, Peter and Andrew. There is something compelling and decisive about the voice that Samuel heard in the night, about James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew, who saw Jesus just walking by and immediately dropped their nets and followed him. In a sort of backwards way, that same compelling note is struck in the story of Jonah, the Bible’s most reluctant prophet, who is called by God to go and prophesy to the Assyrian city of Ninevah. Jonah receives “the call” and immediately boards a ship bound for Tarshesh—the exact opposite direction from Ninevah. That’s when Jonah is swallowed by a big fish, then vomited up on the shore three days later. God calls Jonah again, and this time he goes to Ninevah, and tells the people to repent, which they do, and so God decides not to destroy the city. Jonah then sulks and whines to God that he never wanted to be a prophet in the first place, that God is too kind, too compassionate, and now Jonah looks like a fool for having prophesied the city’s destruction. It’s a wonderfully humorous story, and it begs a multitude of theological questions; but even in the case of Jonah, that least enthusiastic of “called ones,” we get a sense of God’s call and claim on certain individuals as special, decisive, unable to be ignored. . . and because of that, not applicable to most people.

“I guess I didn’t have the call,” mused Gary the accountant, and I would guess that many Christians, even some of you sitting here, people who work in the world of business or university teaching, plumbers, carpenters, stay-at-home moms, would say the same thing. They have never been “called by God.”

I would disagree. These great “call” stories—they are wonderful and compelling, but I think also misleading at some level. I don’t know what Ryan or Warren or Harold or Caroline, or any of the other ordained folks here would tell you, but I know that for myself, when I first began to think about ordained ministry, I hesitated because I had experienced nothing in my life that measured up to the stories of being “called” in the Bible. There was no voice, no overwhelming religious experience, no sign, no guilt-edged invitation signed by God saying: “I want you to do this work.” That worried me. I kept looking, trying to make a “real” call experience happen, and it just didn’t.

So you want to know what happened? I was, in those days, working for *American Heritage Magazine* in New York City, and the magazine did book excerpts from time to time. William Sloan Coffin, former chaplain at Yale and a great minister and social activist—one of my mentors—had just written his autobiography. The book editor at the magazine asked me to read the manuscript and see if we wanted to use some part of it. I decided to set up one of my call opportunities for God. I made this little deal with God that if I read the manuscript and something there compelled me, I’d quit my job and go to seminary. I thought it was really helpful of me to set God up with such opportunities. I stayed up all night reading the book, and at 5:00 a.m. I finished; and it was interesting, but...no call. I went and lay down on my bed disappointed that nothing had happened, and as my mind wandered in that place half way between sleeping and waking, I found myself thinking about the American Puritans, my spiritual heroes; and I remembered that the Puritan divines had a strong, well-developed theology of call. But it was not about voices in the night and guilt-edged invitations. Our Congregational forbears believed that all people are called by God. ALL people are called by God to make of their lives something purposeful, something that utilizes their particular gifts and serves their community. Minister, candle-marker, ship captain, full-time parent: if it is a job that serves a useful purpose, if it is done with integrity and kindness, if it makes good use of one’s God-given skills, then that is “call.” It is ministry; it is important; it serves God and God’s people.

Later that morning in 1978, I went into my office and handed in my resignation. A month later, I started Yale Divinity School. And I went, not because I had been reassured that my life’s call was somehow special, but because I had been convinced that all of us, in whatever field of endeavor, have a capacity to serve God’s ends. What had been held up to me was not the holiness of one particular type of work, but the ordinary sacredness of work itself, of the careful giving of our lives to do all manner of things that are useful: the whole variety of things that meet people’s needs. When the plumbing doesn’t work, the last thing you need is a minister to pray over it. It’s the plumber who draws your “hallelujah!” and makes you feel close to God. When your husband of 56 years dies, and you are terrified of facing the financial world alone, then you thank God for Gary the accountant, who kindly and with integrity met the needs and stilled the fears of my grieving friend Lois—and who knows how many others like her.

What would it mean if we all thought of our work as “calling,” as our service to God? Paid, unpaid, with a job title or without—we all know what we do that gives beyond ourselves. Some of us create beauty; others work at making things that are useful; some of us teach; some of us nurture; some of us meet real and immediate needs. Others have the gift of vision and

management. A variety of gifts, and a variety of jobs to do that create an entire tapestry of “callings.” What difference would it make in the world if all of us who acknowledge God’s claim on our lives lived our work as call? Would you choose your work differently if you asked the questions: does it make best use of my gifts; is it useful; can I do it kindly and with integrity? Would it make you do your work differently, and how would you feel about what you do? My suspicion is that most of us do not take on either the honor or the responsibility of seeing our life’s work, whatever it is, as a response to God’s call to us.

It says on our church bulletins that all of us are ministers. I would invite you to know that to be true both inside and outside of the church. We carry our ministries not just in what we do here, but out in the world as well. We all of us are invited to own God’s quiet but nonetheless persistent call, to carry that sense of call with us in all that we do, to give glory to God with all that we have and all that we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.