

**“What do you mean, ‘Follow you, immediately?’”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10    1 Corinthians 7:29-31    Mark 1:14-20**

Whenever anyone wants me to do something immediately, there is something deeply ingrained in me that just kind of automatically reacts, “What do you mean immediately?” As a child, I can remember being deeply engrossed in reading a book or working on a model airplane or listening to a football game on the radio, and my Mother would call out, “Stephen would you \_\_\_\_\_?” And I would reply, “Sure, just a minute, Mom.” I don’t even remember an example of what she was asking me to do, but I do remember saying more than once, “Just a minute, Mom, let me finish what I am doing first.”

There is a sense of urgency in each one of our scripture lessons for this morning. There is always a sense of urgency when we are addressed by God. That is always the case when we are addressed by any authority. We are approaching the end of January. Our Internal Revenue Service doesn’t say to us, “Oh, by the way, could you file your income tax return when you get around to it.” No, they say, “April 15 is your deadline!” The voice of authority. If you see flashing blue lights in your rear view mirror, that doesn’t mean, “Oh by the way, if you aren’t in too big a hurry and if it isn’t too much of an inconvenience, could you find an agreeable place to pull over so we could buy you a cup of coffee and have a little conversation.” That’s not what those blue lights mean at all, is it? We know that.

When we are addressed by authority there is a kind of urgency involved. In the Old Testament God spoke to Jonah, the most stubborn man in the Old Testament and God told Jonah to go on a mission to the biggest, most evil city in the world, Ninevah. Jonah heard God, he didn’t exactly tell God, “Just a minute, let me finish what I am doing first.” He was more creative than that. Jonah’s response was to book a cruise going in the opposite direction of Ninevah, to the opposite edge of the world to a little place called Tarshish.

Paul is also speaking with a sense of urgency. In the short passage we heard he lists a circumstance or relationship that has an importance. He mentions the marriage relationship, those who are in the middle of grief, those who are in the middle of celebrating, those who are in the middle of commerce, those who are engaged with the affairs of the world, and he says, none of those is the most urgent issue in front of you.

You may feel like me talking to my mother in responding to the apostle, “OK Paul, we hear you, we know you are all fired up about this, just calm down a little, we’ll be with you in a minute.”

I don’t like being hurried up in making decisions. I like to make decisions when I am ready to make the decision, not when someone else thinks it is time for me to make a decision. It is one of the reasons I find buying automobiles such a strange process, the sales strategy always seems to be to do whatever it takes to

encourage me to make a decision today, right now. I don't think that is always the healthy, prudent thing to do. Most of us, myself included are far too prone to what we call, impulse buying, buying things on the spur of the moment that we don't really need at all.

But that same sense of urgency is also clearly present in today's Gospel lesson where Jesus proclaims his mission and calls his first four disciples by name. That urgency is right on the cover of our bulletin, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

The first thing I want to say to you this morning is stated in the negative, but it is gospel, and it is good news. **Don't react to all the words you hear.** I have never lived in any other time so I don't know that it was like in any other day, but I do know this about this time – there is no shortage of words at all. Last week the scripture from 1 Samuel began "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." I'm not sure whether the word of God is rare in these days or not, I actually have a hunch that God may be speaking just as God has always spoke but there is such a cacophony of words today that it is more and more difficult to hear what anybody is saying, let alone God. And there are so many speaking such contradictory things about God that even trying to listen to all religious messages can make your head swim. I repeat the first gospel, "**Don't react to all the words you hear.**"

When I get mail these days both here at church and at home I stand beside the trash can, I don't want to invest time in actually reading all those words. I did salvage one piece of junk mail a couple months ago – the return address caught my eye. It said, "Blah, bla, bla blah blah blah, blah blah." It made me smile, especially as one who is a member of a profession that is known for using many words.

Let me try to choose my words carefully. If we are saying that not all words are really worth listening to, then how do we tell the difference, how do we make the choice as to what asks for our attentiveness. What words do have real authority to speak to our lives? How do we recognize God's word that claims authority in our world and in our lives?

The writer of the gospel of Mark loves the word immediately. Matthew uses the word 14 times; Luke uses "immediately" 12 times; John uses it just twice, but Mark uses the word immediately no less than 35 times. So what does it mean to respond to the call of God in Jesus Christ "immediately"?

It is not about encouraging an impulsive decision; it is not about trying to manipulate us into doing something we would rather not do at all. Neither is it about getting any kind of simplistic answer. Jesus is very clear in stating his mission; he is very simple but not simplistic at all. He does not resort to slogans or three simple steps of discipleship.

This is his proclamation, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news."

I want to tell you a parable. You're not supposed to do this, but I will tell you the point of the parable right up front. The point is this, the gospel is very simple but don't try to make it easy because it isn't.

A young man came up to an elderly, very wise rabbi and said, "Rabbi, tell me the secrets of the Law. The Rabbi said, go away and come back in ten years, you are too young to understand anything.

The young man persisted until finally the Rabbi said OK, let me ask you a question, two men came down a chimney and were standing in the house looking at each other. One man's face was all dirty and sooty and one man's face was very clean. Which man washed his face?

The young man said, Oh that's easy, the man with the dirty face. No that's not right at all the Rabbi said. The man with the dirty face looked at the man with the clean face and assumed his face was clean. The man with the clean face looked at the man with the dirty face and he washed his face because he assumed his face was dirty as well. Go away and come back in ten years. No please no, the young man said, ask me another question, I'll get it this time.

Ok the Rabbi said, two men come down a chimney and one man's face was dirty and one man's face was clean. They are trying to look at each other. Which man washed his face? The young man said OK I get it now, the man with the clean face washed his face.

Of course not the Rabbi said, the man with the dirty face had soot all in his eyes and couldn't even see so of course the man with the dirty face washed his face. Don't be so silly, go away and come back in ten years. The young man thought hard and pleaded with the old man, please give me another chance.

Reluctantly the Rabbi asked the question one more time, two men come down a chimney. They are looking at each other. One man's face looks clean and the other man's face looks dirty. Which man washed his face? The young man thought carefully and said, the man with the dirty face washed his face.

Of course not the Rabbi said, They both washed their face. How could anybody come down a chimney and be so presumptuous to think they didn't need to wash their face?

I love that parable because it says that even though the gospel may be simple responding to it is never a matter of just getting all the answers right. None of us will ever have everything we need to know all neat and tidy on our answer

sheets. There is always a greater horizon to the vastness of God's love. There will always be a greater depth to God's mercy.

Think about this: how would you describe a color to someone who had been blind since birth? What can you say about blue or red or green to someone who has no concept of color, or bright, light or dark? Well, you would almost have to use examples from the sense the blind person did have, such as blue is cold, compared to a hot red. Green is smooth and sweet, while yellow is sharp and pungent. Purple has the depth of a bruise. Orange may not rhyme with anything, but it feels like sun on your face on a warm day.

Think about it. That is one way to describe much of the mission and message of Jesus. His mission was to explain the impossible to the unknowing. How could he explain the vastness of divine love in a way that would fit into an individual heart? How could he ever hope to present the fullness of eternity to a people who measure our lives by clocks and calendars, decades and schedules? How could Jesus ever reveal the unity of all creation to nations so concerned with their difference, communities competing with one another, and individuals primarily concerned with themselves?

Jesus mission may have been to explain the impossible to the unknowing but, and I think this is a way that we can begin to recognize God speaking to us today, it was always profoundly personal, he called Simon and Andrew by name; he called James and John by name; he knew their circumstances; he knew the relationships that were important to them. The word of God speaking to us has a very personal immediacy about it, but at the same time it is never just about us, it is never just about what makes sense to us, it is always profoundly universal as well. Jesus opens us up; did you notice that the second hymn we sang was the same as last week. That was on purpose; the last verse "O Christ, I cannot search my heart through all its tangled ways, nor can I with a certain mind my steadfastness appraise." The hymn writer is saying "God, you know me better than I know myself, and he concludes I only pray that when you call, come follow, follow me, you'll give me strength beyond my own to follow faithfully.

There is a story about the famous sculptor Auguste Rodin who is most famous for his "The Thinker." It seems that one day Rodin noticed a very large crucifix that had been discarded from a church that was being remodeled. It was lying on a pile of trash. The crucifix was not very beautiful at all, it was terrible marred and defaced, but Rodin saw the potential for beauty in it, so he went and collected some friends and they helped him carry it to his house. But they had a little problem, actually it was a big problem – the cross was too big for his house. What to do? A sensible man might have just returned it to the trash heap where he found it, but not Rodin. He decided to knock out some walls and raise the roof of his house to make room for the cross.

Now I tried to verify this story and was not able to but even if it is not historically true, it is spiritually true. So my final question to you is this, "Has following Christ made you knock out some walls and raise the roof of your life. If it has, that is kingdom living, that is following Christ "immediately."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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