

**Sermon for January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Third Sunday of Epiphany**

**Mark 1:14-20**

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD  
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This morning in our gospel reading we heard of the **beginning** of Jesus' Galilean ministry and the calling of the Jesus' **first** disciples; Peter, Andrew, James, and John. It must have quite a miraculous sight. Mark tells us that when each of these fishermen were called by Jesus they ***immediately*** left their nets, they left their livelihood, they left their family business and followed Jesus. Seemingly no questions asked. How **wonderful** to have such ***immediate*** faith and willingness to follow God's call.

As awesome as the calling of the first disciples is; what I would like to focus on this morning is our Old Testament reading from the book of the Prophet Jonah because **unlike** the calling of Jesus' first disciples, when Jonah was called by God he got a ticket on the first boat that was going about **750 miles** in the **opposite** direction of where God wanted him to go. **Not only** was Jonah reluctant, God had to chase him down!!!!

Now, I do not know about you, but in **my** life I have found myself sometimes acting much more like **Jonah** than those first disciples. There are **many** times throughout my life when I have heard God's call and even though I

have **not necessarily** turned tail and run; I have **ignored** the call, I have put the call on the back burner if you will. **One thing about our God; He does not give up on us.**

For those who do not know the story of Jonah—**other than** the story of his being swallowed by the whale or great fish—he was one of the **12 Minor Prophets**. His book was written around the **8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.** and he was a **successor** of the Prophet Elisha. In Jonah's time the Northern kingdom of Israel had **literally** been swept off the face of the earth by the ruthless Assyrians. They were known for their brutality by acts of torture. The Assyrians had **plundered** Palestine looting and burning its cities. The Israelites of the north were taken into captivity in the area which had become known as **Samaria**. Nineveh, where God wanted Jonah to go, was the **capital city** of the Assyrian empire—it was one of the largest cities in the known world at that time—a city of about 120,000 people. As a matter of the fact; his **assignment from God** was to, *“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”* Is it any wonder Jonah wanted no part of this? He did **not** want to go to preach to against them. Would you????

**This** is when Jonah ran away, got himself a **boat ticket**, and **headed** himself for Tarshish hundreds of miles the other way. He wanted **no part** of God's call to go and give the news to people who were known to be so wicked and evil. One

thing lead to another, Jonah **boarded** the boat, the Lord sent a **great wind** which caused a **huge storm**, Jonah asked to be **thrown overboard** as the men on the boat knew Jonah was running away from God, (*you can run but you cannot hide from God—don't forget that!!!*) the **great fish came** and swallowed Jonah, during the time he was in the belly of the great fish Jonah prayed to God with thanksgiving, the fish spit Jonah out on dry land and he was back where he started. Then God tries again with Jonah—just like He will **try again** with you and me-- **one thing about our God; He does not give up on us**. Grace and challenge, forgiveness and responsibility are **intertwined** in this story. Sin and God's loving call to action are seen in stark contrast here, set side by side all rolled into one. We read, *"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.'"*

**This time** Jonah listened and obeyed God—he went to the great city of Nineveh. **What** God wanted Jonah to offer the people was the chance to change their ways, the chance to have their sins forgiven, the chance to have the beginnings of a new life—hey, *isn't that what God offers to us too???*// But Jonah was much like the rest of us when we **do not** want to do something—when we want to control our own destiny, in **this** case Jonah wanted to determine who should and who should not be punished, but he **reluctantly** obeyed God. When Jonah went to Nineveh, walked **1 day** into the city, and **cried out** what was

actually 5 words in Hebrew. They are: *40 days and Nineveh overthrown*. That was **all** he said. In those 5 words the **power** of God was unleashed because the whole city—even the animals—fasted, they put on sackcloth in of repentance of their sins, and **ultimately** God changed His mind about the **calamity** that He said he was going to bring about to the city.

It seems as though Jonah was the **greatest prophet in history** because those 5 words made all the difference to the people. **No** other prophet in the Old Testament had such an overwhelmingly positive response in such a **short** time!! But even **that** did not make Jonah happy. He was **angry** at God for forgiving these people who had been so ruthless and evil. After all, **Jonah was a Jew**. He could never quite understand about God's great **forgiveness** toward those who had sinned against God's own people. Jonah could never quite understand that there is a **wideness to God's mercy** no matter who we are. Jonah even said to God, "*I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*" Well, there is it. Jonah said it himself!!!

For you see Jonah, **never quite got it**. God gave **him** a second chance—*just like we get*, even **after** he turned the other way when God called him to serve—*just like we might be called a second, third, or even a fourth time*, even **after** Jonah wanted to be thrown overboard off the boat so he could die-God sent the great fish

to swallow him and spit him out on dry land, even though Jonah was asked a **second time** to go to Nineveh as God's representative, he **never quite** got the fact that God's grace, mercy, and compassion extend to **all** people not just this one or that one. The grace, mercy, and compassion of **Our** God does not just go to the people we think ought to receive it, like the **reluctant** prophet Jonah did. **Our** God is much bigger than that.

So the question for us today is: ***How far can our God reach?*** We only have to look to the life and ministry of Jesus to see the answer to this question. God comes to  **dwell** among us in our  hearts, in our  minds, and in our  spirits; to  **unconditionally** love us and care for us  no matter who we are and  no matter what our situation or  **what** we may have done.  **God calls** us to  follow Him again and again— **calling** us to speak an  impossible word. God will  reach out and follow us to the  **ends** of the earth to  love us and to  make us His own. To offer us the  **free gift** of salvation. A salvation that is a  gift of pure grace and mercy. Jonah's story  reminds us that  **we do not own** that grace and mercy,  **nor** is it  ours to give out as we wish. God will be  forgiving toward us all because that is the very  **heart and nature** of our God.  **One thing about our God; He does not give up on us.**  
 **AMEN.**