

Creativity in Connection

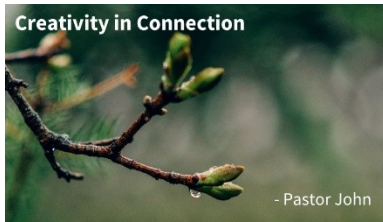
January 24, 2021

Jonah 3: 1-5 and 10

¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth... ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

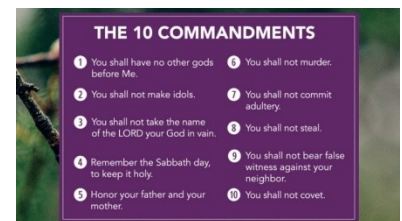
Mark 1: 14-20

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". ¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.



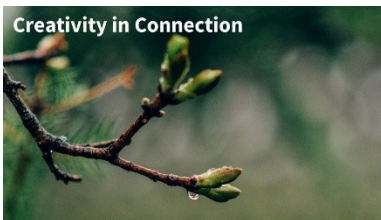
As we continue to explore how we are created anew by God, we begin this morning by reviewing the basics of our relationship with God. In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and his people was first defined by the Ten Commandments. In the years that followed, the Law grew and evolved and came to be just over 600 rules by the time that Jesus arrived to show us a clearer look at the relationship that God desired to have with humankind. As we begin this morning, let us begin first with a word of prayer...

The Ten Commandments. Given to Moses about 1,600 years before Jesus' birth, these ten rules defined both the relationship between God and his people and the relationship that we are to have with one another. Can anyone name some of the Ten Commandments?... Here they are in a simplified version. The first four define our relationship with God. In summary, the first four: we are to have no other gods nor are we to make idols, we are not to take God's name in vain and we are to keep the Sabbath holy. The remaining six define our relationships with one another: honor our parents and do not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet. Even though these commands were pretty straight forward and while it is easy to see why following them would keep our relationships with God and with one another in good order, followers of God and believers in Jesus Christ have struggled to follow these ten basic rules almost since they were handed down to Moses. Beginning with Moses himself and down through people like Isaiah and Ruth, Obadiah and Daniel, Amos and Jeremiah, the people of God have always needed prophets to help us



walk faithfully with God and in right relationship with one another. The prophets have reminded us of God's ways and have worked to call the people back into right relationship when we have strayed. There has always been a need for the voice of God to rise up from within various communities of faith, offering challenging words, encouraging words, reminding the people of their need for connection to God and to one another.

Ever since the first disconnect in the Garden of Eden, the history of the people of God has been filled with disconnects both great and small. These range from the nation's disobedience to individuals that sin, becoming disconnected from God on a personal level. This idea of connection can even extend to the calls that we hear from God. As we have talked these past two Sundays about our call to play our role in God's story and as we wrestled with our call to minister in his name, perhaps you have been reminded of times when you felt like you did not want to answer the call or were uncomfortable with the "opportunity" that God was providing or you recalled times when you did not want to hear God's voice. Maybe once in a while you even felt like running away from the voice or nudge that you were feeling. If so, you, like me, can relate to Jonah.



Creativity in Connection

Turn with me to Jonah 3 as we look at one who heard the call and chose to run away from God. Jonah was, at best, an unwilling messenger concerning this call to go to Nineveh. You might recall that when he was first called by God, he boarded a ship and headed in the opposite direction. Jonah attempted to disconnect from

God by getting physically as far away as he could. But through a fierce storm at sea, God reminded Jonah that God was still in charge. Tossed into the sea, Jonah was swallowed and then spit out three days later. Having been humbled during his time in the fish, we join Jonah's story today as he again hears God's call to speak the word of God to others. The God of second chances continued to pursue Jonah, desiring to use him for the purpose of bringing redemption and wholeness to the people of Nineveh.

In verse two God directs Jonah, saying, *"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you"*. God is reconnecting to Jonah and is seeking to connect to the people of Nineveh through his prophet. Even though Nineveh is a city of the Assyrians, Israel's enemy, God wants to save them too. This is part of why Jonah begrudgingly goes to Nineveh. There, in the great city, he proclaims to the people: *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"*! For three days he trudges around the city, warning of God's anger with them. The people of Nineveh hear the call and choose to believe



God. In verse five we read, *"they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth"*. They fasted and put on sackcloth, signs of repentance and of turning from their evil and sinful ways. In verse ten we read that God saw what they did and that God *"changed his mind about the calamity... he did not do it"*. Jonah's words had struck a chord with the people of Nineveh, drawing them into connection with God. The words of the prophet drew the people to God.



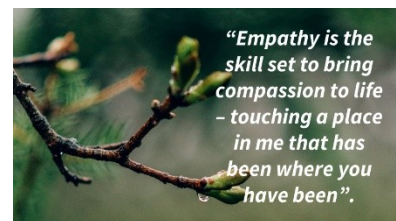
Nineveh was fairly typical of places outside of Israel. Although many people and places knew of God, they certainly did not believe in God or follow God's ways. Some of these nations had experienced the power of God through their contact and interaction with the Israelites. Nineveh was one of these places. When the voice of God was proclaimed in the streets, the people were moved and had a change of heart, a new willingness to humble themselves and to become connected to God. As I pondered this story and Jonah's responses to God in the whole story found in the book of Jonah, I was reminded of how God worked in and through me to change my heart towards those that I did not like, those that I avoided, those experiencing issues of poverty and homelessness.

Working at Dakota Middle School and doing some volunteer work at the church, I would walk from school to church once in a while. I would sometimes encounter people on the street who would ask for money or some other form of assistance. These encounters made me very uncomfortable and I would avoid these folks if and when I could. Once I began to get involved with the men's group and with the youth group, we would cook and serve the meal at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission a few Sundays a year. First Church served the meal on the third Sunday of each month. The groups that I was involved in took our turns. Over time I began to lead these groups. In that role, I began to form connections to the staff at the Mission and the responsibility for the sharing a short devotional and offering a prayer before the meal most often fell to me.

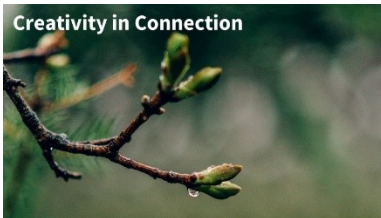
Then, in the 2010, the church opened the Hope Center and I began another connection with people who served those struggling with issues of poverty and homelessness. As God opened my heart to this area of ministry, he continued to soften my heart and to guide me into relationships with some who came to the Hope Center. Previous to the 2010 school year, I resigned all of my coaching contracts and began to work at the church as the director of youth ministry. During those two years serving in this role, God and others began to speak into my life, calling me into ministry. When I finally resigned my teaching position and responded to God's call to vocational ministry in 2012, I also began volunteering once a week at the Hope Center. Each Friday afternoon I would work at the Hope Center, helping guests with their mail, phone messages, and other things. Especially during this time at the Hope Center, God helped me to see these folks as my friends, as people I genuinely loved and cared for. I felt a deep connection with the staff as well as many of the Hope Center "regulars".

The people who I would cross the street to avoid just a few years earlier were the people who I looked forward to seeing on Friday afternoons, once in a while on a Sunday evening at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission, and even once in a while at church. God created a connection in me that is still very strong to this day. As I look back on these experiences, I would say what God developed in me as he changed my heart was empathy. I heard this quote in a webinar that I participated in this week:

"Empathy is the skill set to bring compassion to life – touching a place in me that has been where you have been".



While I never personally experienced issues of poverty or homelessness, through serving and getting to know those that did, I began to have an understanding of these issues and their causes and I developed empathy and love for them. Doing so, I came to see each person at the Hope Center or at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission as a beloved brother or sister in Christ.



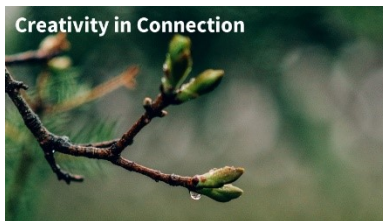
Turn with me to Mark 1 as we look at the call of the first disciples. As we turn to Mark's gospel, I invite you to take a few seconds and to think about how God first called you. Was it as a young person in Sunday school or at youth group? Was it at camp or on a retreat? Was it during a particularly difficult time in your life? Or was it some other way that you first heard Jesus say, "Come and follow me"? If there is someone here this morning that would like to share your call story, we would love to hear it... Of, if you are more comfortable to share it during the week, I would love to hear your call story in that way too!

Our passage from Mark 1 begins with Jesus traveling to Galilee where he proclaimed this message: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news"*. Jesus was formally announcing to the world that his ministry was, first, about to begin.



Second, his ministry was a call to repentance and belief in the new life that he would offer. And, third, the message would be good news to the world.

Passing along the sea of Galilee, Jesus calls his first disciples. Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people"*. Just a little further down the shoreline, now with Simon and Andrew in tow, Jesus calls James and John. They too leave their fishing boat – plus their father and the hired men – to follow Jesus. We know very little about what caused these four men to leave all that they knew behind to follow Jesus. But we do know that something inside of each of them connected to Jesus in a way that was powerful enough to lead them to a radical change of life.



When God called Jonah, it was a fairly simple call. One day God directed Jonah to go to Nineveh to *"cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me"*.

It was really a very clear call. God told Jonah exactly what he wanted him to do. Jonah knew that it was God calling him. In the scriptures we have no indication otherwise. And Jonah chose to flee. We know from the rest of the book of Jonah that he did not want to see God spare his enemies. You see, Jonah knew that God was a forgiving God. In Jonah's mind, if he never went to Nineveh, they would not ever have the chance to repent. Later in the book, in fact, Jonah becomes very angry when God spares the repentant city. He thought that they deserved to die. This part of the story reveals that God also had work to do in Jonah. Sending him to Nineveh was part of that work. The same was true of me when God sent me to the Cornerstone Rescue Mission and to the Hope Center. God had work to do in me, so he sent me to the places and to the people that I needed to get to know so that he could change my heart.

Like Jonah, initially I refused to hear the call and to step into those uncomfortable spaces for a long time. But God was also a God of second chances for me. God's pursuit did not end until that particular part of his plan for me was worked out in my life. In a similar way, I believe that if Simon or Andrew or James or John would have not responded as they did that day by the sea, then Jesus would have come back around in their lives too. It may have been via a different route or through another means, but Jesus would have pursued and pursued them until they followed him.

When I think about the call that God gave to Jonah and the call that Jesus gave to the first disciples, I find huge differences. Jonah knew where God wanted him to go and what God wanted him to do once he got there. The call that Jesus gave to Andrew, Simon, James, and John was not clear at all. A man walks up out of nowhere and basically says, "Come and follow me". The call was very vague – what does it mean to be "*fishers of men*" after all? Jesus does not say where they are going or what they are going to do. He provides no information of real value. Compared to Jonah's crystal-clear call, it was almost the total opposite for Andrew, Simon, James, and John. And yet in these two scenarios, they were the ones who said "yes". What would explain this seemingly unexplainable difference in the response to the call? For Jonah it was a voice speaking to him; for the disciples it was a physical person that spoke to them. For me, personally, it is easier to dismiss a voice I hear in my head than it is to ignore someone standing right in front of me. Yes, I have dismissed or ignored the voice of the Holy Spirit more than once, more times than I could count. And I have said "no" to plenty of people who have stood before me too.

But I have always evaluated what they had to say or made sure I understood what they were asking of me before I gave my response. Often, I would ask for clarity or for more information. Logic was almost always involved. Perhaps that is why I struggle to understand the disciples' response or even to be able to say with confidence that I would ever be able to respond the same way. With faith, there is always a certain level of trust and belief that must accompany our decisions. When God asks us to step out in faith, we usually must do so like the first disciples – without any real surety and without much information. As we grow in our faith, though, one comes to understand that God is the guarantee, that God is the presence, that God is the one in control, that God is the one with the information. If we will but hear the call and willingly step forward into God's call, then our journey will be much like the journeys of Andrew, Simon, James, and John. My friends, what an adventure they had, right?

In this season of Epiphany, in this season after Christmas, we are reminded of our call to God and to one another. As God sent Jonah to Nineveh and as Jesus called the disciples – both to help others hear that the kingdom of God was drawing near – so too does God call you and me to help others hear the same message: the kingdom of God draws near. To the many who are currently disconnected from God, to the many who have chosen to distance themselves from God, and to those who have never been connected to God, the good news remains good news. The hope and love and peace and joy of Jesus Christ continues to draw near, beckoning each person, each beloved brother and sister, into a relationship with God.

If we are but willing, God will continue to call and use each of us in creative ways to connect all people to God and to connect us all to one another. Through you and me, may others experience the kingdom of God drawing near. May it be so for you and for me as we seek to live out our faith this week, bearing the good news to a world in need, bringing the kingdom of God near. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How has God called you at various points in your life? How have both your faithful and unfaithful responses helped you to grow in faith?
- 2) *Pray*. To whom or to what might God be calling you right now in your life? What is holding you back from saying “yes”? Pray for discernment.
- 3) *Study*. Read Jonah 4. Jonah is angry at God and we are left hanging. When have you been where Jonah is at the end of the story? How did (or could) God work in you to bring you to a place of peace and trust?