

The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Joyce Hollyday

Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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Today is the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time. Whoop-de-doo. There will be a few interruptions to this stretch called Ordinary Time in the church's liturgical calendar—most notably Easter and Pentecost—but we are at the beginning of a very long season that culminates on November 18th with the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time.

Today is *not* the celebration of our 10th anniversary, or our re-covenanting and new membership Sunday; it is not Christmas Eve in the barn at Swan Mountain Farm, or New Year's Day; it is not Epiphany, or The Baptism of Jesus Sunday, or the commemoration of Martin Luther King's birthday. I feel a bit like I took a deep breath on Thanksgiving and finally exhaled today.

Please don't misunderstand. I have loved every minute of the music and stories and drama and energy of the past two months. I love that this is what Circle of Mercy is.

And now...I'm thankful for Ordinary Time. For deep, slow breaths and quiet spaces.

The week before last, I was in Ontario working with a Canadian Mennonite on a book about community. I was heading home, ironically enough for those of you who are superstitious, on Friday the 13th. I left the city of Waterloo at 8:30 in the morning in a snowstorm, on a long and slow drive to the Toronto airport, where the planes were lined up for de-icing and delayed just long enough for my flight to land at LaGuardia as my connection to Charlotte was taking off. I just missed getting on two standby flights, had a two-hour layover when I eventually made it to Charlotte—where I was rescued from total frustration by the raspberry truffles and toffee at the airport's Rocky Mountain Chocolate Shop—and finally made it home at 12:30 in the morning, thanks to Ken Sehested.

On that 16-hour journey home, I gave thanks once or twice for good work that takes me to interesting places—and many more times for a long stretch at home to look forward to. I crave some Ordinary Time.

Last week we heard the story of Samuel's call by God to service. We continue the theme of call this week. Our gospel lesson is a story of ordinary people on an ordinary day. Two brothers, Andrew and Simon (who would later be renamed Peter by Jesus), were out in their boat on the vast Sea of Galilee. They were doing what they did every day—catching fish.

Jesus called to them from the shore and said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And, says the gospel of Mark, "immediately they left their nets and followed him."....Really?

It happens again a little later and a little farther down the shore, when Jesus sees two more brothers in their boat mending their nets. James and John respond to his call the same way, jumping overboard and leaving behind the nets, and their boat, and their father with the hired help, who are now left to finish the job and carry on the work.

I feel about this passage the way I did when I preached during Advent on the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. Isn't there just a tiny bit of dialogue missing? Fish for people? Did not one of these brothers have a question about what that meant? Was there no hesitation, no looking back at a father, or a boat, with longing? Was it really as simple as jumping into the sea and following a stranger who promised a career of fishing for people?

I'm very thankful that whoever put together our church lectionary long ago decided to pair this gospel story with Jonah's. The context for tonight's Hebrew scripture passage is the opening of the book of Jonah:

Now the word of God came to Jonah, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of God. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of God.

OK, this is more like it. God calls a prophet to deliver a hard word to a rebellious city, and he runs in the opposite direction. Silly Jonah, thinking he could go somewhere that God was not. You probably remember what happened next.

God "hurled a great wind upon the sea"—as only God can do. The sailors want to know what's

up, who's to blame for this terrible turn in their fortune. They cast lots, and of course the short straw ends up with Jonah, the stranger. They interrogate him, wanting to know about his job, his country, his people, and what he did to bring about this calamity.

To his credit, Jonah answers honestly and takes the rap for the bad weather. And when the sailors ask what they can do to calm the terrible storm, he tells them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea." Which is exactly what they do.

Jonah famously spends three days and nights in the belly of a whale, praying for deliverance. The last verse of chapter 2 states, "Then God spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Which brings us to tonight's passage.

Chastened, Jonah does what God had asked him to do in the first place. In God's name, he announces doom to the big, bad city of Ninevah. And, lo and behold, says our passage, "The people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." The king took off his kingly robe and sat in ashes. He decreed that all humans—and all animals—should be covered in sackcloth, a sign of repentance; that no humans or animals could eat or drink; that all people must turn from their evil ways and cry out mightily to God, so that God might change God's mind and save them. Which is exactly what happened.

What we didn't hear in our passage tonight was Jonah's response. The first verse of chapter 4 tells us, "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." The prophet argues with God, accusing God of being too gracious and forgiving, which is why, explained Jonah, he jumped on a boat and tried to run away in the first place. He knew God would just be merciful in the end, so why bother?

A bit of melodrama follows. Jonah goes off and sulks outside the city. God, ever compassionate and gracious, makes a bush grow over Jonah's head, to give him shade, which made Jonah very happy. But in the morning God made a worm attack the bush, so that it withered, and when the sun came up, it beat down on Jonah, and he was so uncomfortable he wanted to die.

And God basically says, "If you're so concerned about a bush, why shouldn't I be concerned about a whole city?" A city in which, says God in the very last verse of the book of Jonah, "there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals." A footnote in my study Bible says, "God still can't get over those *animals* running around in sackcloth!"

I'm reminded of other call stories in the Bible. Of angels appearing to elderly Sarah and announcing that she will have a baby; claiming that she was far too old, Sarah laughed. And of Jeremiah, who when called by God to be a prophet, asserted that he was too young—"only a boy." And Moses, who reminded God that he stuttered and could never be eloquent enough to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. "Please send someone else," was his answer to God's call.

Thank God we have these very *human* human beings in our faith history. They were ordinary people, going about their ordinary lives, on ordinary days, when God interrupted and turned everything upside down.

***I'm trying to see God in all that is ordinary
and still be open to mystery, to God's interruptions.***

I love Ordinary Time for its calm and order and predictability. Nothing extraordinary to prepare or do. I'm trying on a daily basis to receive the gift of everyday faithfulness, to see God in all that is ordinary.

But the message tonight seems to be that we need always to be open to mystery, to God's interruptions. The extraordinary can happen on an ordinary day. We never know what may come, or what we may be asked to do.

It may not be dramatic. God's call rarely comes as a voice in the night or a visit from an angel. But still, the invitation is always there: to drop whatever is in the way and follow Jesus.

I end with a poem by Mary Oliver, titled "Messenger":

*My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.*

Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,*

*which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.*

*The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,*

*which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.*

Amen