

What I want to know is, “What were they thinking?”

Simon, Andrew, James and John just dropped what they were doing, left everything and followed Jesus. To me, that sounds like a huge decision and you would think that Mark would give us some insight as to why. He doesn’t.

Personally, I have limited experience with leaving everything to follow Jesus. The closest I have ever come to doing it was when I graduated from Seminary. After I had the summer off, I moved to Indiana to begin a post-graduate fellowship. I packed everything I owned into my old Honda Accord with 136,000 miles on the odometer and headed up the road to Indiana. It felt a lot like leaving everything behind except that in reality, I was arriving to an apartment already arranged and a moving allowance to furnish it. Still, it felt like I was leaving everything. It was unfamiliar. It was flat. It really felt unfamiliar and flat around December of the first winter when the wind came sweeping down the plain. We had a cold snap that was cold even for Indiana and with the wind-chill, the temperature was a bone-penetrating twenty below. That was when I learned that in extremely cold climates cars can be ordered with engine block heaters – you literally plug in your car to keep it from freezing. I am certain when the Lord was knitting my inward parts, that particular option was not included. I thought I was about to freeze to death. I was just sure I was suffering for Jesus.

In retrospect, I suppose my personal fish story of leaving everything to follow Jesus isn’t so compelling.

But Andrew, Simon, James and John... now that’s a different story... except we don’t know what they were thinking. The bible doesn’t tell us.

The bible does tell us a little bit about some other stories where God has called a man or woman to do something.

It doesn't paint a pretty picture of the process. Jeremiah bitterly levels the charges at God, "you enticed me and I was enticed." Jeremiah found God's call seductive until his neighbors started mocking him behind his back – and then to his face. Elijah had a few choice words for the creator of the universe too when he had Jezebel threatening to kill him before sundown and feed him to the dogs.

All in all, being called to be God's mouthpiece comes off as a rather unappealing job, the sort of profession that one might list in response to James Lipton's question, "what profession, other than your own, would you least like to try." "Prophet of the Lord." Of course there's Jonah's story too.

Despite the sermon title, the story of Jonah is not about the fish. Trust me on this one. Despite the reality that if you went to Sunday School as a child, you probably sang the same songs that I did about Jonah praying in the belly of a whale, it's not about the fish. You don't want it to be about the fish. If it's about the fish, the lesson is, "Do what God says or Shamu is coming for you." That's not the message. The message is a message of tremendous grace from God for both Jonah and the Ninevites.

Let me tell you a little bit about Jonah. The fish story is the least interesting part. God called Jonah to go and preach to the Assyrians. Everybody hated the Assyrians because they dominated the ancient near east. Everybody who was anybody got invaded by Assyria. If you had anything worth having, Assyria could be counted upon to try to take it.

Because of their wicked ways, God called Jonah to go and preach to them with a dire warning, that in forty days, they would get a measure of their own medicine. “Forty days more and Nineveh is overthrown,” was the message God called Jonah to proclaim.

And then Jonah said “no.”

Jonah’s refusal was not without a rationale. “No,” he said, “I know how you operate, God. I’ll go preach, they’ll repent, and you’ll relent. And I’ll wind up looking like a fool.”

And to hammer his point home, Jonah booked passage in the opposite direction. Rather than going to Nineveh, he went to Tarshish. Why he thought God couldn’t find him in Tarshish, the bible does not say.

Have you ever been to Tarshish? It is a very appealing place. I have been to Tarshish.

I have been to Tarshish many times.

Tell your boss the move he wants to take with the company is unethical, or go to Tarshish? Tell your friends that the way they are treating the new girl is just plain mean, or go to Tarshish? Stop the bullying behavior of your neighbor or go to Tarshish?

Tarshish is a very appealing place. Some of the finest people I know have spent time in Tarshish.

Then the fish story happens. It is really a relatively minor interlude, a few verses to indicate that when God is pursuing you, you may as well give in.

The rest of the story transpires just exactly as Jonah predicted. He went to Nineveh, preached his sermon, the people repented, God relented and Jonah was angry. There is then a desert chapter where a very petulant Jonah berates God for the kindness that God has shown to the Ninevites.

Once you get past the fish, it is a story of enormous grace, a story of a God who won't leave us alone. It is a story of a God that wouldn't leave the Ninevites to their evil devices and wouldn't leave Jonah to his unkindness.

I wonder if Simon, Andrew, James and John knew that story?

There had to be some compulsion to leave everything and follow. They could have gone to Tarshish too.

If they had known what was good for them, they would have gone to Tarshish too.

Have you ever wondered what happened to the apostles after the Bible leaves off telling the stories of what they did after Jesus' ascension?

Andrew was crucified on an olive tree in Greece. James was beheaded by Herod

Tetrarch. Simon Peter was crucified upside down in Rome under Nero's rule.

John alone died of old age.

What on earth could they have been thinking when Jesus came long?

The Bible doesn't tell us. We only know that they left everything and followed him.

I think I told you all a while back that the moving company weighed my things when I moved from Charlotte to Atlanta. It was a very humbling thing to find out that my worldly possessions weigh 5200 pounds.

I cannot reasonably leave everything and follow Jesus. Nor do I much want to. I like it in Atlanta. I've bought a house and acquired more stuff. I have obligations. You do too. You can't just up and leave everything and follow Jesus, can you? If you have children, you have an obligation to care for them. If you have elderly parents in your care, you have responsibilities. The rent or the mortgage is due. You have committee

responsibilities at the church. There are so many things that can stand in the way of leaving everything and following Jesus.

This really is a completely irresponsible text for the lectionary to include for worship.

It's fine for children's Sunday School. You can eat goldfish crackers and cut fish out of felt and sing, "come with me and be fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men."

(Clearly I grew up before we learned about inclusive language.) It's fine for children's Sunday School, but to preach about it, to encounter it in worship... surely we're not meant to take it seriously and pattern our lives on it, are we?

That's the problem with the stories of faith in the bible, all of those fish stories of people leaving everything to follow Jesus. They just aren't realistic. They aren't appealing.

Who wants to leave everything and follow Jesus? Wouldn't you rather just go to Tarshish? I hear it's easy living there.

I don't mean to belabor the point, but if you've got responsibilities that you can't just lay aside, this is not a useful passage of scripture. I mean, realistically, think of everything we'd have to put down to emulate it! Think of all the stuff we're carrying around that we'd have to put down in order to leave everything and follow Jesus? I've got 5200 pounds of things I'd need to lay down. Well, maybe more. That's just the things I'm carrying around that can be physically weighed. Maybe there's more that needs to be put down.

Maybe we need to put down some of the stuff we're hauling around to be able to follow Jesus.

Well, that's not so bad, come to think of it. Is there anything you'd like to put down?

I have a friend that likes to think of hurt feelings like rocks. She says you just carrying around a great big satchel full of rocks when you're carrying around hurt feelings. She says the more you carry, the more disappointment you experience, the heavier the bag of rocks gets until you finally can't move at all.

That's a great metaphor. It sounds a lot like sin.

As long as we're asking troubling questions today, what was so incendiary about the Gospel that it caused three of those four apostles to die of unnatural causes? Could it have been that they were, in fact, preaching a message that you can put it all down and follow Jesus?

That sounds like grace to me. When we come to the point that we just don't want to carry around whatever is weighing us down any more, the good news is that we can put it down. Whatever hurts, whatever betrayals, whatever disappointments we have endured – moreover whatever hurts, whatever betrayals, whatever disappointments we have inflicted – we can put them down. We can give them to Jesus. That's the good news of the Gospel.

There is as vivid an image of grace as I know in the movie *The Mission*. A slave trader bursts in upon his lover and his brother and in a fit of rage, kills his brother. He is eaten up by feelings of remorse and guilt- by his sin- and he goes to a priest for confession, seeking absolution. The priest, though he knows who the man is, that he is rich and powerful, refuses to give the man cheap grace- he refuses him absolution without penance. Instead, he offers the man absolution, but only after he journeys into the interior of the Latin American country where they live. And on his journey, he must carry on his back the accoutrements of his trade. As he travels through the jungles that he

has pillaged for slaves he carries with him the armaments that he used in his kidnapping of native people- the breastplates and swords and guns- each heavy, each weighing him down. The scene of grace comes when he is climbing the side of a steep ravine. He is high above the water and it begins to rain. He is slipping, surely toward his death, the weight of his sin that he carries physically in the form of the bundle of arms is dragging him down and when the priest can wait no longer and takes pity on him and cuts the rope tying him to his burden and the pack crashes to the valley floor and he surges upward relieved of his burden- that's grace- that's putting it all down. That's leaving everything. That is the God of the bible, the God of Jonah and Simon and Andrew and James and John, a God who pursues us relentlessly in order to release us from sin.

I find myself wondering though, if that is the God that most people know.

Recently I read an article by Martin Marty about modern American religious attitudes. I won't share the substance of the article with you because the title says it all. It was called, "God Is Not Going to Whomp You."

Well, that's really the point, isn't it? That's the point of Jonah, that's the call that the disciples heard and shared. That's the sort of good news that tells us that we can put it all down and follow Jesus, and tells us why four fishermen would turn aside from telling fish stories and instead tell the Gospel.

We talk a lot about calling in the church. We should. God does a lot of calling. Not too long ago I asked you a question, "what would you do if God was calling you to do something?" I had several wonderful conversations with folks about that sermon later, and one question in particular stood out. It was this, "what do you mean when you say God is calling us to something?"

I love Frederick Buechner's answer to that question. He said, "The place where you are called is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger."

God does a lot of calling because God has a lot of work to do. What's your deep gladness? What is the world's deep hunger?

I don't know what they were thinking. But I do know because they set aside their fish stories and went along, because they put it all down, left it all there on the shore, we have a story to tell. It's a story about a God who loves us.

Do you think the world has a deep hunger? Do you have deep gladness?

But then, there's always Tarshish...

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.