

Voluntary Evacuation
January 21, 2018
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10:

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." 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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:

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

I know there are some folks here from Minnesota. I'm not sure if you're Vikings fans, but I sure am after last week's playoff game. One sports journalist said the final play of the game wasn't quite the Immaculate Reception of Franco Harris for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1972, but in my football-watching lifetime, I would call it that. The game and the play have been since named, however, the Minneapolis Miracle.

It was the NFL playoff game at the Minnesota home field. One of my favorite theologians, David Lose, who is from Luther Seminary in Minnesota, said in a commentary last week: the Vikings should not be in the playoffs. No one expected it; they were hardly mentionable throughout the whole season -- with a mediocre record last year and a rough start this season with the replacement quarterback and the top-draft-pick running back both out with season-ending injuries. It didn't look promising.

But in this playoff game last Sunday afternoon, the Vikings were up the whole game, until the fourth quarter, with 3 minutes left, when their opponents took their first lead in the game, bringing up the score 21-20. The Vikings answered that with a field goal, leading 23-21. The opponents responded by charging down the field and

making a field goal in just 64 seconds, now claiming a 24-23 lead with 25 seconds left on the clock.

This is when I went out to walk the dog while it was still light outside. My husband said the game was over.

What happened after I left, though, is that with only 10 seconds left in the fourth quarter, quarterback Case Keenum, from his own 39-yard line, passed to wide receiver Stefon Diggs. The name of the play was called "Seven Heaven," and Diggs caught the ball over a diving opponent, who, as he was attempting to make the tackle, collided with his own cornerback, which allowed Diggs to stay in bounds with no defender in sight. Diggs sprinted down the sideline to the end zone as time expired in seconds: 2, 1, 0, touchdown! The Vikings won 29-24 on this last-second 61-yard touchdown. It was the first playoff game in NFL history to end on a game-winning touchdown as time expired.

Stefon Diggs, 24 years old, in an on-field interview just after the game, said, "My quarterback gave me a great throw and God took care of the rest. I give God the praise on this great Sunday." Then he began to wince as he held back tears and said, "God put me in a position, and I just tried to take advantage of my opportunity..." He said later, "Plays like this you dream about your whole life, and it finally happened. In the huddle, the quarterback said, 'I'm gonna give somebody a chance,' and that somebody was me. God put me in this situation. The team, we keep fighting till the end, until the clock hits zero."

Diggs' attitude of determination reminds me of the perseverance, and sense of purpose that Jesus has as he comes to proclaim God's good news in Galilee. John the Baptist has been put in prison for his message of repentance, and Jesus doesn't give up or lose hope; instead, he insists that the time has come, no time to wait – take a chance, go for it, make it happen, now, while you still can.

The gospel of Mark starts off with this sense of urgency and it doesn't ever stop. There is a pushing, a driving force throughout the book that's like a train running. It's going, it's moving. Are you coming aboard, or are you going to miss it? We gather this sense from the author's use of words like "at once," "immediately," and "without delay."

Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee (here's a photo of what it may have looked like that morning, if it was morning) and Jesus sees fishermen Simon and his brother Andrew casting nets into the water. Jesus says to them, "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people," and *at once*, they leave their nets and follow him. Done. No discussion, no pros and cons list, no clocking out, no good-byes. They leave their nets and follow him at once. This must be some pretty good news.

It seems far-fetched at first. So... they just immediately leave their nets? And what about Jesus? He doesn't need a resume, an interview, a background check? Any kind of vetting?

Similarly in the Jonah passage, Jonah goes to Nineveh and gives the Gentiles a forecast of destruction and they immediately shape up! They turn from their evil ways and avoid the calamity pronounced upon them. Really. The whole exceedingly large city, everyone, great and small, repents, fasts, puts on sackcloth.

"Repent" sounds like a scary word but it is really not. Repent means reorientation; a turning from our ways of doing things towards God's way of doing things. Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and urging people to repent, to reorient themselves towards God and to believe the good news. And people begin to follow him. In the Jonah passage, the people of Nineveh repent by turning away from their destructive ways.

As much as football is a beloved American pastime, so we know now of its indelible harms to the players. Helmets may protect the head, but they do not protect the brain from suddenly and forcefully crashing against the skull, causing concussions that can lead to permanent neurological impairments, such as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE, whose symptoms include depression, aggression and dementia.

Doctors are making claims that football must be changed to lessen the number of concussion risks, including no tackling in youth football, no tackling during practice in high school, ejection for intentionally striking the helmet of an opposing player during a game, and even eliminating opposing down-linemen who collide every time the ball is snapped.

How will the football establishment respond? Will they make the changes necessary to ensure the safety of players? Is it time? The doctors, as modern day prophets, have spoken of the impending destruction. Will the coaches, athletic departments and the NFL repent? Will they reorient the game towards something less harmful to the players?

We don't want to surrender ourselves. And we like things the way they are. We like to think we are in control. When God first told Jonah to give the message of impending doom to the Ninevites, Jonah tried to run away. What happened prior to our passage today is that God told Jonah to tell the Ninevites of their impending doom and Jonah jumped on a ship headed the opposite direction, to Tarshish, and was thrown overboard and swallowed by a giant fish before finally agreeing to do what God asked of him. He tried really hard not to listen and to get out of it. We don't want to be called to a new place to do something new especially if it is going to cause controversy or backlash.

I remember being asked to be a Deacon years ago. It just sounded like such a time commitment. I mean, an hour and a half on a Sunday for the service was too long to begin with, now I'm being asked to stay for another 2 hours for a meeting once a month? Mmm, I don't think so. I had the opportunity to be the music director... Choir rehearsals would really cut into my proclivity to go out on Thursday nights, and Sunday mornings I'm not always on top of my game as in being prepared to play all those songs. I don't really think so. It's not really for me.

A parishioner told me after the service last week about God calling Samuel, "you know, that same thing happens to me! I hear a voice calling my name at night, and I think it's my spouse but my spouse is sound asleep. Then it happens again, and again! And I wonder, who is calling me?" I said, Well, now you know to say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!" like Samuel was told to do by Eli. The faithful parishioner honestly replied, "But I don't want anyone calling me in the middle of the night!" No prophet does. We'd all prefer to sleep through the night and not be bothered.

Here is when we must consider the word *kairos*, the word Jesus uses when he says The time has come, or the time is fulfilled. *Kairos* in Greek is different than *chronos*, another word for time, which means chronological or sequential time like day, hour minute. *Kairos* is opportune time, a time when the conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action. We are bound by the limitations of *chronos*, by space and time with past, present and future; but in God's time, in *kairos* these are all one. God sees the opportunity as now.

We have heard about a lot of evacuations recently. There were the evacuations in October in Sonoma from the raging fires and the evacuations in Southern California from the fires in December, and then last week evacuations from the mudslides in Montecito. There was the false emergency alert in Hawaii that advised residents to seek shelter from an incoming ballistic missile threat. And this week, there was a 17 year-old girl who jumped from the second story window of her home, evacuating to alert authorities of the abuse happening to her and her 12 siblings in Riverside.

Sometimes evacuations are mandatory, and other times, voluntary. A voluntary evacuation means that a decision must be made in a split second with no guarantees. In essence, Jesus is proposing an evacuation to the four fishermen in today's gospel reading. *Come. Follow me.* Is Jesus' call to the fishermen voluntary or mandatory? *Come. Follow Me.* It sounds mandatory but he doesn't threaten or force them to come. They come, apparently, willingly. Ready to leave their nets, their livelihoods, their security, their families, their identities. Ready to go with this man in whom they obviously feel an inordinate trust.

I am reminded of one of the prayers last week, when someone here lifted up the life and witness of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and how he was willing to die for his beliefs, and for God to grant that level of commitment to this person offering up the prayer. This was a *kairos* moment for the person praying; a moment of clarity and vision about saying yes to service and sacrifice. These are our peak experiences

when we are in alignment with our heart's true calling and say yes. Where we are open to a new identity. A reorientation.

Unlike the four disciples at Galilee or the people of Nineveh, I didn't immediately drop everything to follow God's calling for me to become a deacon and the music director. I took a roundabout route, but my *kairos* moment eventually came, where I saw the light and followed. Fortunately, I hadn't missed the chance. Those promptings were definitely leading me to reorient.

The fishermen on the shoreline needed good news, and so do we today. The good news is that God is with us, among us, inviting us to walk alongside. Will we seize the moment? Will we say yes? Will we choose Jesus? Will we choose life?

Will we stay in the game, fighting until the clock runs out? Will we have courage to resist and speak out against the evil and oppressive powers of violence, cruelty and injustice? Will we as the church and as individuals become signs of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims: signs of hope, peace and love? When the opportunity presents itself, will we take it?