

Year B, Epiphany 3
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always accepted in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Yesterday as I was ignoring my call to finish this sermon which I had begun several days earlier, I turned on the television just in time to see an episode of a CBS sports program called “Men of March,” this one featuring Josh Pastner, head coach of the University of Memphis basketball team. I knew about him because when it came to sports there was nothing Dick Beebe loved more than Memphis basketball, and I enjoyed it too. We spent many hours watching the Tigers play, and I remember well how Pastner came to be head coach when the program seemed to be on the verge of falling apart after John Calipari moved to the University of Kentucky.

At the time, Josh Pastner was thirty-one years old and had been a recruiter and assistant at Memphis for only a year. When he was named head coach, the fans were bemused and skeptical. Like many other university towns across our country, basketball is sacred in Memphis. What happens inside the FedEx Forum is more important to the city as a whole than what takes place in the more than two thousand churches and religious buildings there. Basketball crosses the divisions of religion, race, gender, economics, sexuality, and every other thing you can think of. It is, perhaps, the only thing that people in Memphis agree to care about. And fortunately, Pastner has brought them what they wanted. His Tigers win seventy-five percent of the time.

If you’re wondering why I’m talking about Memphis basketball on this Sunday when “call” is obviously the theme of the day, consider that Josh Pastner had known since he was five that he would be a coach, and has spent the years since focused on becoming one. Is his call from God? I can’t answer that, but I do know that it fits the definition of vocation: a strong desire to spend one’s life doing a certain kind of work. For people of faith, vocation and God’s call go hand-in-hand.

Today the scriptures bring us two stories about calls that are widely different, from each other and also from Josh Pastner’s story. In Mark’s Gospel, we hear how Jesus called first Simon and his brother Andrew, and then the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Mark uses his words sparingly, as always, so we don’t have many details. Jesus promised to make Simon and Andrew fishers of people; they followed him immediately. When he saw James and John, he called them immediately. Mark wants us to know there was no hesitancy on either side. But let’s not think that these guys are mere fishermen who respond on a whim. Yes, they were fishermen, but as such they were businessmen with obligations, commitments, and probably families. Their story reminds us that God’s hand was on Jesus and on those whom he called to follow him, just as God’s hand is on us today.

Jonah’s story is a bit more complicated. We first learn of him in the Book of Second Kings; he was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam. He’s considered one of the twelve Minor Prophets, a term that relates to the length of the books that carry their names. Jonah’s book is short—only four chapters—an easy read that tells how Jonah came to be swallowed by a big fish. That’s part of it, at least, but if it’s all we remember about Jonah, we are seriously missing the point! We have to read the entire book to understand what that is.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, telling him to go to Nineveh to warn them that God would no longer ignore their wickedness. We can only speculate about why Jonah didn’t want to go; we’re told that he went in the other direction, catching a ship at Joppa to take him to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. God sent a mighty storm upon the sea, so strong the ship felt like it would come apart. Everyone on board blamed Jonah, who suggested they throw him into the sea to

appease the Lord. When they did, the storm stopped, but Jonah's troubles began. He landed in the mouth, and then the belly, of the big fish that was waiting for him.

After three days and three nights, Jonah prayed. "As my life was ebbing away," he said, "I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you...But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay." After hearing Jonah's pitiful prayer, the Lord spoke to the fish and it spit Jonah out on dry land. Once again, the Word of God came back to Jonah, telling him to go to Nineveh. As he walked into the city he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" To his surprise, the people took him seriously. Everyone there believed that God was ready to punish them, so they repented and changed in ways that the Lord could see. Their sincerity changed God's mind, and they were safe from the calamity planned for them.

Everyone should be happy now, right? Not Jonah. Jonah became angry at God, saying "God, I knew you would change your mind; that's why I didn't want to come in the first place." God asked just what Jonah had to be angry about. Jonah replied, "If you aren't going to kill them, then kill me! I'm better off dead." As God watched, Jonah stomped off to the outskirts of the city to sulk and wait. Despite his anger and disrespect, our merciful God arranged for a tree to grow right next to Jonah, and its shade made Jonah very happy. But God wasn't finished yet. The next day, God caused the tree to wither. The sun bore down on Jonah, and with it a hot blistering wind, making Jonah miserable. Once again, he said "I'm better off dead!" And once again, God asked Jonah what right he had to be angry. We can almost see Jonah wringing his hands and stomping his feet when he replies, "Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die." And God says, "How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure?" Do you understand, Jonah? Do we understand? Call is about God, not about us. We are merely servants!

Let's assume, just for the sake of conversation, that Josh Pastner is a religious man, who sees his work as a call from God. I hope that's true. He knew what he was meant to do with his life at an early age and embraced it. It's lucrative for him, of course; he makes a lot of money. Yet that doesn't necessarily mean it's easy. Many of the young men he works with have come from humble, even disadvantaged homes. He lives in the tension of keeping them on the right path at the same time he is making the fans happy, and thereby ensuring a solid future for himself and his family. And he is very happy doing what he is doing.

The fisherman Jesus called to be his disciples apparently didn't spend a lot of time thinking about what their future would hold and surely they couldn't have imagined how it would all turn out. But they followed anyway, faithfully obedient to the adventure of God's call even though they had no influence over the outcome.

And then there's Jonah. We can't help but see Jonah with sympathy. We don't always want to do the things we're called to do, even those things we've volunteered to do. And we all have our opinions, and sometimes we get angry over things that don't involve us, or even affect us. But Jonah's story isn't told to us to affirm our humanity or make us feel better about ourselves, although it certainly does that. Jonah helps us remember that God is God, and we are not. God has the right and the ability to change. That's not for us to question, but rather to be thankful for. God also has the right and the ability to call us to serve and be in relationship with God. We can choose how to respond, but as we do, let us consider what is our best response. Is it gladness, single-mindedness, or selfishness?

The Psalmist reminds us just how things stand: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work." *Amen and amen.*