

*Follow Who?*

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**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Jonah 3:1-10  
Mark 1:14-20

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### Jonah 3:1-10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

<sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” <sup>10</sup>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, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the

nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.



My friend David sent to me and some other friends the opening to his sermon for this week after we had studied the Jonah passage. “I’ll be interested to hear where you guys go with it.” I wrote back that what it would be really helpful was if he could finish it and send the full sermon to us before Sunday morning. “You sure you don’t want me to come by and give it for you as well?,” he asked. “Well, that would be nice,” I replied, but I realized that he was busy so if he could just send a video of him preaching that would suffice. Well, no video showed up this morning so I guess I’ll just give you the opening to David’s sermon and then we go home. Okay?

“The last place Jonah wanted to go was the big city – Nineveh – exactly where God was trying to send him. Jonah would rather stay curled up in the hold of his safe little ship, hiding from God in plain sight rather than go to that big city where there were so many people, so many people of different nationalities, different languages and different religions.

“The big city looked like the most hopeless place in the world to him. He’d read about those people of Nineveh in the papers – about how violent they were and what bad things happen there. From all he could tell from the local media those people were hopelessly lost. There were homeless people, beggars, and desperate folks ready to take advantage of you at every turn.

“So when God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, that great city, Jonah had boarded a boat to in the exact opposite direction, toward the suburbs of west Tarshish.

“Scared, lonely, and confused, Jonah stayed in his room on the boat as much as possible, watching TV and playing video games. When a storm raged outside, he tried not to pay any attention, but he had a niggling doubt deep inside. He felt a twinge of responsibility for the storm, knowing that God had called him and he wasn’t paying any attention. Jonah kept playing “Call of Duty” until the officers of the ship came and threw him out – and off the ship altogether.

“The story goes that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish – and it was about that time that he began to wonder which was worse – following God’s direction, or going the other way.”

David’s sermon opening ends there. But I can’t just leave it hanging now can I? In fact, his opening ends exactly where I want to start this morning. How about that?

Jonah had a choice: “Following God’s direction, or going the other way.” I feel like I talk about choice a lot when I preach and this is yet another of those points in the reading and study of scripture where it comes clear for me once again. Faith is all about choice. God gives us a choice – follow or go in the other direction. Not that either is necessarily bad but it is truly about choice.

Jonah could have continued on to Tarshish, couldn’t he? He could have followed through on his decision to run in the opposite direction of where he *knew* God was pointing him.

The story of Jonah is not meant to be a factual story, by the way – Jonah, swallowed by a big fish, living in its belly until God makes it spit him out. It’s not fact, it’s a metaphor for exactly what I’m talking about this morning – following and choice. Jonah isn’t an historic character, he is fictional and his story is meant to give us yet another compass point for making our own God-call choices. Here’s how the story begins:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, 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 the LORD. 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 the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3)

From the very beginning of this fish tale, Jonah knows for a fact that God wants him to go to Ninevah. He chose the first ship headed in the opposite direction. Wrong choice. He knew it. Eventually he makes the right choice – the choice that he knew God had wanted him to take from the very beginning.

Jump forward about 500 years from when the Book of Jonah was written and we find Jesus and his potential disciples alongside the Sea of Galilee. These fishermen – Simon and his brother Andrew; James and John, the sons of Zebedee – were no doubt faithful Jews as was Jesus. They knew scripture as well as anyone else in the Galilee – they learned it at the feet of their mothers and fathers and the other adults of their communal-style villages where everyone cared for and taught each other’s children. The leaders of their synagogues and their circles of companions taught the – they knew scripture as told to them in the oral tradition of story-telling since peasants like they and Jesus probably were unable to read. They knew these stories – they knew the Jonah story and the lessons attached to it. You can run but you cannot hide.

So when Jesus makes them an offer – gives them a choice – “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” or stay as you are and live the life you know, they “immediately” left their nets and followed. They had no idea what was to come of the decision – fortune or heartache or new life or painful death. They had no clue. But they knew the Jonah story and they knew what following meant. They knew they could run away in the opposite direction

and they knew what the option to not follow would mean if God really wanted them in this new role.

A new role. A new chance. A choice. A new beginning.

One of the key purposes of Mark's Gospel is to help us understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a radical and bold move on the part of these fishermen. Why did they do it? Was it simply because of Jesus' personality and message? The call is so strong that they give up everything – their boats and nets, their families, their old life and old ways of doing things and “immediately” they make this radical move in order to become disciples of this charismatic preacher.

They make the choice and decide who to follow. Follow themselves and the goals and plans that thought they had all figured out for themselves or follow where most likely they – like we – know where God wants them to go with their lives. Toward a new beginning.

These four fisherman are taking a calculated risk by following a leader whose future is uncharted, uncertain, and unpredictable. They are walking away from a familiar past and what they knew was probably the life they had in front of them in their family business and they choose a questionable and uncertain future. Being a Galilean fishermen was an acceptable and fairly secure, albeit subsistence, occupation. It was their father's business before them. It would be their children's after them. The Sea of Galilee had abundant fish. It was hard work. But it was good work. It could maintain for them a good, decent living as it had for their fathers and grandfathers and their families. Why would a person turn his back on something so secure? There appears to be only one answer: they believed Jesus' word to be true. They literally took him at his word when he declared, "The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

The call of God to follow may not be as radical for us – we may not have to walk away from everything that we find secure – but no doubt our choice it will be just as meaningful. For us it still means choosing to leave a familiar past for a questionable future – like taking a new job, accepting a new position, moving to a new community, making a career change in mid-life, any of those things that we've all done that usually cause us anxiety. Life is always presenting us with moments and times of crisis and opportunity. These first disciples made such a bold move because they heard God's call and they believed Jesus' word.

The point is, Mark wants us to realize, that they did it ... and they did it now. Tom Seaver, the legendary baseball pitcher, once asked Yogi Berra, "What time is it?" Yogi replied, "Do you mean now?" Now is the time.

“The best time to plant a tree,” says an African proverb, “is 20 years ago. The next best time is now.” Now is the time to follow, says Jesus. Now is the time to decide, say the disciples. Now is the time to choose, says God.

Jonah tried to run and it didn't work. How many stories like that do you know? I can recognize now that I knew pretty early in my life that God had grabbed hold of me and that I was called to this kind of ministry – but I ignored it. I was about 14 years old sitting in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class taught by Mr. Urbanski when I decided that I wanted to be ... a lawyer. My great-grandfather had practiced law in West Virginia in the late 1800s, my grandfather and his 3 brothers had followed in JW's footsteps and practiced together with him. My father and his siblings were sidetracked by WWII so none of them went to law school. I wanted to follow in the tradition that had skipped a generation. So I did.

But I knew. Pretty early on I knew the tug of God on my life. My senior year of college I began to wonder what I would do if I didn't get accepted into law school. I could teach social studies or

American history – I could envision myself doing that. I could be a pastor – I knew that possibility was there and that the church had always had a pull on my life – “Nah, there’s no money in that.” I was accepted to law school, I chose, I ran that direction, I graduated, I practiced for a few years in Tarshish, but that call to Ninevah was still nagging at me. As soon as the big fish choked me back out onto dry ground, I followed. And here I am. Here’s the decision for us. And it’s all about choice.

Are you willing to follow Jesus as he calls you into the community-at-large? What would that mean? It would mean as Jesus carried out his ministry in the world, so are we called into the world. He washed dusty and dirty feet. He fed the hungry and healed broken limbs. He opened sightless eyes, cleansed leprous skin, and cared for the homeless and forsaken.

Are we willing to follow Jesus into the work place? What would that mean? No more oppressive relations between employers and employees. No unjust labor practices. No sexual harassment. No gender discrimination.

Are you willing to follow Jesus into the midst of your home? What would that mean? It would mean significant changes. More equality between husbands and wives. More shared responsibilities. Openness and honesty. It would be risky because it would bring an end to "life as usual." It would bring new direction, a new sense of purpose, along with understanding and hope.

Are you willing to follow Jesus? That is the key question for all of us. Are you willing to follow? The choice is ours.

I have decided to follow Jesus  
I have decided to follow Jesus  
No turning back, no turning back  
Though none go with me, yet I will follow  
No turning back, no turning back.

Amen.