

Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:14-20
Third Sunday after Epiphany
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It should have been obvious. I've read this story a hundred times before today, but this was the first time I made the connection. That happens frequently with familiar passages. I think I know it inside and out. I've examined it from every angle. There isn't anything more to be gleaned; nothing more I can possibly learn or say, so I start blaming the lectionary.

Why does the same story have to come up every year in January? It doesn't matter which of the gospels we are reading. It's still your same basic story about Jesus calling the disciples. What new insight can we gain by hearing it yet again?

Let's start with the story, itself.

In Mark's version, there's no time for dilly dallying. As one colleague from New York City likes to say, Mark has a cab to catch. He's a man with a mission and he's not messing around. It takes three full chapters of Matthew's gospel to prepare us for the start of Jesus' ministry. But Mark, on the other hand, gets us there in less than one chapter.

The sense of urgency reflected in the pace of Mark's story is unparalleled by any of the other three gospels, leaving us with the feeling that we better make a decision for Jesus now or else. Maybe that's the way the gospel was presented to some of you when you were younger.

Whether it was or not, most of us are familiar with the language of this approach and we have spent a lot of time disavowing it. Many of us have been so eager to distance ourselves from that approach that we never learned to articulate what we *do* believe in a compelling manner.

And here's the thing. In our time, there *is* a new urgency to Jesus' call and our response. But what I see differently, for the first time, is that Jesus is not calling us to make a decision to follow him and then just settle in. This is not a one-time decision to get us moving in the right direction. It's a call to get moving and to keep moving.

This concept is at the heart of Brian McLaren's latest book about the church, called *The Great Spiritual Migration*. One of the great religious thinkers of our time, McLaren argues that the church needs to keep moving forward because "the human story is a tale of people in motion."¹ Beginning with our ancient ancestors, he traces their migration from Africa to the

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), p. ix.

places in the Middle East, in Europe and in Asia, from the age of hunting and gathering to farming through the industrial and modern eras.

“The Bible also tells a story of humans on the move,”² he writes. The Hebrew bible’s central stories of exodus and exile and return infuse the biblical plot with the “deeply human tension between settling down and moving on.”³ Jesus, himself, is a man without a home, constantly moving from town to town, never settling down anywhere for very long.

[Jesus’] first words were ‘Follow me,’ and his final words were ‘Go into all the world.’ Jesus, we might say [writes McLaren], was a migrant messiah and the Bible is a book of migrations. ⁴

Just as humans move and change, so, he argues, Christianity is also in need of migration. It is also in need of change. When I re-read today’s passage with this in mind, immediately I began to see it: the choice to follow Jesus is a commitment to a life of movement and change.

Jesus came. Jesus announced the time had come. Jesus demanded a response. And the disciples responded, dropped everything to follow him.

But they didn’t set up shop in a building and sit down to study the Bible together. They were constantly on the move, learning and growing as they followed Jesus and observed his encounters with other people. It was not an easy way of life and I think they must have tired of it. Having finally found the long-awaited Messiah, I’m guessing they thought themselves ready to settle down.

In the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, which we will read three Sundays from now, Jesus takes a few of his disciples up the mountain with him. The disciples are awestruck where they see Jesus changed into dazzling white clothes, standing with the superheroes of their faith, Moses and Elijah.

Peter, the ring leader, declares, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”⁵ But there is no time for dawdling. In a blink of an eye, Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus and his disciples are headed back down the mountain, on the move once again.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, his earliest followers were called People of the Way. Invoking this language of journey, they left Jerusalem and began moving out from the center of the Jewish Christian world into the world of the Gentiles, where their understanding of what it meant to be church was challenged and reshaped along the way.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. x.

⁵ Mark 9:5, NRSV.

Cornelius, the Roman centurion, becomes the first gentile convert. Peter believes it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or even visit a Gentile, but God shows him in a vision that he should not call anyone profane or unclean.

Peter is astonished to hear Cornelius and his friends speaking in tongues and praising God, and so he calls for them to be baptized and welcomed into the community. That is just one example of how God leads Peter and the others to a broader vision of the church. Had they settled in Jerusalem and stayed, the early church and its understanding of God's vision would have become fixed and rigid.

The early church was not called to settle down and get comfortable and neither are we. We're not called to reach the pinnacle and then start to hunker down. We not expected to get all the answers figured out and then stop and expect to be rewarded, because as long as we are on the move, the questions keep coming.

The faithful church follows Jesus into new places and new relationships, seeking new insights about what it means to be his disciples. A disciple is a student and as long as we claim to be a disciple of Jesus, we will never graduate.

I love the way McLaren puts it,

To see how needful repeated and ongoing migration has been in Christian history, just imagine if church leaders today allowed political leaders to preside over church affairs as Constantine did in the fourth century. Imagine if popes or pastors today had the power to launch armed attacks against Jews and Muslims in their neighborhoods, or organize new rounds of Crusades as they did in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Imagine if church officials today imprisoned, tortured, banished, and executed those they considered heretics the way they did in the medieval era of the Inquisition. Imagine if a pope or other religious leader today legitimized land theft against non-Christians, or called for their enslavement, as was done in ... 1095 and ... in 1455. Imagine if the majority of Christians today still used the Bible to defend anti-Semitism, slavery, segregation, the inferiority of women or the earth-centered universe. ⁶

Our theological tradition reflects this commitment to adapt and change in the language of our motto: "the church reformed, always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit." Reformation is in our DNA and reflected in our history of making statements of faith, like the one we will use later in today's service. Each points the way forward, adapting and changing as the world changes, discerning how God's word speaks to us in our day and time.

⁶ McLaren, p. 12.

Adaptation and change has been hard for parts of the church that cling to a vision of the post-World War II era of overflowing sanctuaries. Hard, but not impossible, if we recognize the negative practices of the church that we need to once and for all fully relinquish. To rid the church of its patriarchy and sexual abuse and homophobia and racism, we have to keep moving forward.

As Brian McLaren says, the church is in need of a spiritual migration – from an institution that has reduced its identity to a collection of correct beliefs to a way of life centered on love, following the example of Jesus’ life and teaching.

Here’s an image for you.

Once, when I was on a family skiing trip, I accidentally ended up on the advanced slopes with no way out but down. I was not an advanced skier. So, I plodded along, falling every couple of hundred yards, until one spill knocked one of my skis off and across the side of the mountain.

Lying there contemplating my next move and what it was going to take to get me down the mountain, another skier stopped to check on me. He helped me up out of the snow and got me headed back in the right direction. As he started to ski off, he turned around, calling over his shoulder. Hey, why don’t you just follow me?

And so I did, deliberately placing my skis in the tracks he left behind him. Together, we slowly meandered down the mountain, skiing from side to side, he leading and I following him, copying his movements and clinging to his words of encouragement. Just as we crested the final hill, we stopped for a break. I hadn’t fallen once during the 15 minutes that I had been following him.

As we rested, the bells in the tiny church near the base of the mountain started to peal and I smiled. Seeing my smile, my guide asked whether I thought I could make it to the bottom on my own and I answered yes. He had shown me how. He went on ahead and I made it down the rest of the way alone, imagining him in front of me, mimicking his movements and placing my skis in the tracks that he left behind.

Clearly, I had not chosen the easy path, but having someone to follow, made all the difference.

Jesus says, “follow me.” We know the journey won’t be easy. We know it leads to places we would rather not go. But like the kind stranger who encouraged me down the mountain when I had become lost and discouraged, Jesus doesn’t send us out to master the course alone. Jesus says, “Follow me”. I will show you the way. I am the way.

Thanks be to God!