



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 24, 2021

Uniquely Called

Dr. Jo Forrest

Uniquely Called

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2021 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems,
without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 25, 2021

Our Epiphany series continues with meditating on God's light shining in our world and on Westminster's call by asking four questions.

Last week we explored "What is God calling us to do?" With Samuel as our witness, God's call often strikes fear at first of how difficult the task might be, only to be met with deeply rewarding experiences.

This week, the question we ask ourselves is "What is unique about God's call?"

The final two sermons of this series will examine how we steward our precious resources and then what sustains us.

The Revised Common Lectionary guides our sermons with ancient texts. As we prayerfully read God's word, we find these stories tend to examine us.

Jonah is a little book, 1400 words, that defies any one category. Perhaps thinking of this as a legend, or an enacted parable is closer to the writer's craft.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the largest city in Assyria, known for its pagan sinfulness and cruelty towards outsiders, to persuade them to change their ways.

Jonah runs the opposite direction, finds himself in a storm, thrown overboard, swallowed into and then spewed from the belly of a big fish.

This is when God finds Jonah lying on the beach.

Before I read from this text and the gospel, please pray with me,

Dear God, we fuss and ignore, we sometimes run and hide, but yet you chase after us. Settle us; silence any voice but yours that we are again startled to hear your truth. Speak through these ancient words that still grasp our lives. Through these words and the meditations of all our hearts, turn us to trust and follow your son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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 God's mind about the calamity would befall them; and did not do it.

Brilliantly, this passage is paired with a reading from Mark.

If Mark's gospel were written today, it would be a series of tweets. Rough sentences, grammatical errors, its urgency apparent with staccato sentences, and the word "immediate" laced throughout, demanding attention and action.

Mark gets to the heart of Jesus' ministry in the 14th verse of the first chapter.

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 sea--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 Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord...
Thanks be to God.

Jonah is the poster child of reluctant prophets. When Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel, scholars believe he included his selfie in the portrait of Jonah. We don't need to wonder too much how he felt about the commission to tell God's story in such back-breaking labor.

With the fantastic notion of a stormy seas and fish big enough to swallow us whole, the story captures the imagination of children and artisans throughout the ages.

Perhaps this is why the fable sticks with us into adulthood, and if we find ourselves wanting to run from tasks we know are right, his story resonates more viscerally. We could call it the Jonah experience.

I've never told my story from such a pulpit, but since I imagine you are still wondering who I am, this is the story of my Jonah month.

I fussed with the call to ministry for years. In my application to University of Chicago for the first masters' degree, I wrote something to the tune of, "I am interested in studying human's beliefs in the divine and how such ideas influence their lives, but not as a clerical call." I drew a line in the sand. I was not going to be a minister.

Years later, after finishing that degree, I continued to labor with and against the idea of ministry. In practical terms, if I were to return to school, I needed to apply

by March and with that application, UofC demanded scores from the standardized GRE test taken no later than the prior December. Think LSAT or GMAT.

It had been decades since I'd taken a standardized test.

That December I worked to finish a difficult project for a client in Seattle, with my team in Boston, while living in Chicago. I sat in the belly of a plane for more days that it seemed I was on dry ground.

That month I was so distracted by needing to take the test, and avoiding the test, I did stupid things. I misplaced my keys. I went to the wrong hotel in Boston one night. Things I never do. I made my life miserable.

On December 29th, yes, I waited until the last possible day, I took an elevator to the top floors at an office tower in the city of Chicago, joining all sorts of test-takers. The rules stipulated that once assigned a cubical, if I got up from my seat before end of the test, I forfeited the score.

Unbeknownst to me this tower was next to the United Methodist Temple. Their sanctuary is on the second floor of an office tower, with law firms and other professional suites until you arrive at the top, with “the chapel in the sky,” and church bells in the tower.

At one point in the test, I got stuck on a math problem. It felt like a theoretical physics problem and futile to continue. I knew I'd failed. Just as I rose from my seat, to walk out the door, you know what came next....

The bells from the Temple began to ring, just as our Westminster steeple does every noon. When the hymn began it was as if God said to me “sit down.”

Oh, I failed the math, but by grace began my ministry education.

Further disclosure, I really did not want to tell my Jonah experience, on a lark I googled the phrase, “Jonah experience.” searching for another’s story. My story it is not as far-fetched as other tall tales.

It is human nature to run when faced with tasks we deem impossible or if the task at hand does not conform with who we think we are or what we think should do.

Jonah may go down in history as the petulant prophet, but he was also the most successful. The only thing standing in the way of Jonah’s prophecy was Jonah.

Jonah looked at the Ninevites with his own eyes, seeing pagans, arch enemies of the Israelites, as not worthy of God’s love. Not worthy of mercy --- he believed mercy just lets people off the hook.

He reminded me of Anne Lamott who wrote, “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”¹

¹ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 22.

Despite his reluctance, after he spoke five terse Hebrew words, “**everyone**” the story tells us, everyone from the peasants to royalty miraculously responded. They put on sackcloths, fasted, and changed their ways.

We can only wonder what Jonah said to persuade pagans, who’d not known nor worshiped God to become so faithful.

We don’t know. And we do.

This story is not all about Jonah, nor those hated Ninevites, it is about God.

God extended mercy to Jonah, giving him a second chance.

God’s mercy reaches far wider than only the Israelites to include outsiders, giving them a second chance.

God mercy cannot be underestimated in its ability to heal broken ways, restoring us to one another and to God’s own self.

God’s mercy knows no bounds.

So too is the call from Jesus.

Mark’s version records Jesus simply preached “repent and believe the good news.”

The Greek word, *metanoia*” translated to “repent,” may be more fully rendered in 21st century vernacular

as “change your heart and mind,” with emphasis on turning your lives to God.

It worked.

Mark then tells us with only “follow me,” Jesus called four men to leave their livelihoods and homes.

Jesus calls, and they “immediately” follow. No hesitation, no questions asked.

Is this because they’re men of superhuman courage or prophetic insight? These are the same guys who later in the Gospel doubt, deny, and abandon Jesus.

They are as fallible and as ordinary as the rest of us, and left to their own minds, might have abandoned the journey or fled as Jonah.

And yet, they followed, not for any sane reason but because of Jesus’ irresistible grace.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

This is not a story about us. It is a story about God, and about God’s ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow — able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for.²

² Debi Thomas, “I Will Make,” *Journey with Jesus*, last accessed January 22, 2021. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2888-i-will-make>.

With and through Jesus, these men became connected to one another and to God in ways they'd not imagined.

Living their lives to a higher purpose, with disparate people outside of tribe or respectability they became whole and loved.

Jonah's prophecy and Jesus' call express the uniqueness of God's promise, first made to Abraham...that the blessings will be as numerous as the stars in the sky...and repeated throughout generations.

All these stories of the promise from an amazing, unique, grace-filled God sound comforting on a Sunday morning, while we relax with coffee.

And yet, we know the impossibility of the call to be Christ's disciple come Monday morning.

This community is not immune to ways the dominant, transactional culture creates a mindset that we must perform in some way, in order to be worthy. "I can only experience grace if _____" and begin to measure ourselves against an impossible standard.

Or we allow the quest to be the GOAT, the greatest of all time, in whatever pursuit, drive us towards the goal without considering the consequences of our actions. All actions carry consequences now or later.

Or we slip into labeling people as insiders and outsiders. If we all look the same, have the same family, those who are not, do not belong, so we

perpetuate a “he or she is does not belong because” hoping to bolster our false sense of comfort.

How easily we forget the promise made by God to love us for who God created us to be.

How easily we let our story to be all about us and forget it is always about God.

How easily we might forget just how amazing, unique and grace-filled God has been, is, and will always be.

So may I remind you of what you have taught me in a very short time in answer to “what is unique about Westminster?”.

You stand as a witness to God in this community, not from the gorgeous steeple rising, but through the day-in-day-out reminders, that you belong to God and one another in ways that stand against the hardened monologue that keeps score.

Meeting with a baptismal couple this week, they spoke of sacrament binding their son to Jesus and to far flung family and friends by the promise you make on behalf of the wider church.

One person described those brief glimpses of time bookending Sunday School in which she could depend upon other teachers’ care and coaching. Raising children is not for the faint of heart and connecting with each other reminds her of the grace to begin again.

Veritas invites youth in a safe place, physically, emotionally, spiritually to be themselves, with each

other. In games and silliness, and prayer and tenderness, you tether Jesus into them so when launched they remember to whom they belong.

Oh, and then there is the way you feed the hungry and care for the poor, revealing to the one who serves what God can do.

Tell me more. Tell each other more and invite them to acknowledge the astounding ways God's grace can and will dominate in this community if we just give ourselves over to God.

Today we ordain Deacons and Ruling Elders, to lead and serve, respectively. These women and men accepted God's call, committing themselves to small and large acts of faith, relying not upon their own strength but the ways God has equipped them for service.

We do all of these things not because we can, but God can and God relies upon our faithful witness.

Please pray with me,

He called them,

The fishermen; the rough and ready workers

With torn hands and resilient hearts

He called them,

To leave it all behind for an uncertain adventure

They were bold enough

Or foolish enough

To follow, to go where he led,

And they were never the same again.

May we too, be bold and brave as we choose to follow.

Amen.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org