

Sermon for July 7, 2019 – “All Those Years Ago...”

14th Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Jonah 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:20-26, 2:1-5

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As many of you know, it's been ten years since I was ordained. As you might imagine I've spent a great deal of time since that day trying to figure out what this all means, what God actually wants me to do .and wondering if He hasn't made some sort of mistake. Some days I still wonder. As I've been thinking about this over the past week and thinking about what I might say to you today, what Scriptures texts I might read, I kept thinking about the Bible passages that have meant a lot to me and that have spoken to the deepest parts of me. What I came up with are the readings that I just read, which is why I read them myself. It isn't a knock against Marc in any way shape or form. I chose these readings because they're kind of like those “before” and “after” photos you see in a lot of weight loss ads.

Most of you know my story, growing up Catholic, going to Catholic grade school and high school where religion classes and chapel were daily requirements. When all that was over, I couldn't get far enough away. Is it surprising then that I identify with Jonah who, when he hears God's call turns and runs in the opposite direction? That was me. I wanted nothing to do with God. The funny thing about God, though is that God is persistent in His pursuit of those for whom He has plans. Oh, we can try to run but, to paraphrase the psalmist, where can we go from God's spirit? Where can we flee from His presence? Not that I didn't try to find out. In fact, I did everything I could to try to hide from God; everything I could to distance myself from God. In hindsight, I think I tried to make it so that God wouldn't want me.

Most of you know that I was a car salesman, a used car salesman. I've also been a bill collector, a repo man, a bouncer, and I've done lot of other unsavory things of which I'm not too proud. It wasn't until I'd done just about everything, I could think of to live my life on my own terms without God that God had me right where He wanted me. And being the kind of God He is, He used someone very close to me to pull me in and set me on the path I now follow. That person's sitting in this sanctuary right now. She's sitting right there. My wife, Jane. I mention her because there are two days that stick out for me from that time during the process of becoming a minister. One, is the day that I was approved for ordination, the other was the day I was finally ordained.

I was approved for ordination at a meeting of the Baltimore Presbytery, and as is usually the case, there was a worship service incorporated into the meeting. When I got to the meeting Jane was with me and we both knew that I was going to be examined by those in attendance to determine my fitness (worthiness) to be ordained. I'd been told ahead of time that I'd be asked, specifically why I wanted to be ordained and why I felt I was ready. I'd thought my answer out very carefully in a way I was sure would impress everyone. I'd written it down because, as Jane knows, my going off script can be disastrous. So, we're at the meeting, all is going reasonably well, and I know that I'm going to be examined later in the meeting after worship. I'm going over what I'd planned to say, and I'll admit I wasn't really paying much attention to the service.

At one point, however, Jane reaches over and takes my hand. And that's when it hit me. That's when I knew not just what I'd say but why I was sure about being ordained. So, the time comes, and I'm called to be examined I think I was asked a few easy questions. Then I got the question I'd been expecting. At that moment my mind went back to the worship service and Jane reaching for my hand. I told everyone that my feeling about ordination was similar to the feeling around the time I decided to ask Jane to marry me. It wasn't a case of do I or don't I, it was a case of do or die. There were no other options for me then or now. I don't think the Presbytery was expecting that answer and I really remember from that point is that they led Jane and I outside of the sanctuary while they voted on whether or not to approve me for ordination. Spoiler alert – they did!

Fast forward a few months later to the second day. I'd secured a call to a church and would start there in just two days. But first, I'd need to be ordained and that's what happened on July 5, 2009. It happened at First Presbyterian Church in Westminster MD; the church where Jane and I had been members, where she served as an Elder and I'd served as Youth Director. I was fine for most of the service. I was fine when they laid hands on me to ordain me. I was even fine when I got into the pulpit to address the congregation. I was fine until I looked over at Jane. When I did, I was hit by this wave of emotion. I was driven to tears that just would not stop. It seemed that everything hit me at once; all that I'd done to had led to this day. I looked at Jane and thought of all the sacrifices she'd made, all that she'd done to support me. I thought about that day at the Presbytery meeting and I just lost it. Somehow, I managed to make it through the rest of the service and ever since I've done my best to make both her and God proud of me, though not always in that order.

I've done my best to serve God and the people He's called me to serve. I'd spent a good portion of my life looking for a God who loved me, a God whom I could love, and I realize, and am continually reminded, that I'd found Him. From that point I was firmly with Paul having decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified, having decided to preach Christ and Him crucified. When God finally led me here to Westwood to all of you, I'd realized that I'd learned a great deal about the practice and pitfalls of ministry and in many ways, it was a chance to start over.

One of the biggest things, ironically, was that to the extent I'd tried to run from God in the past I had now been trying to run from the past. I had been trying to distance myself from what I'd done, from the person I'd once been prior to being ordained. I'd decided that I didn't like that person and wanted to be someone new. That's what this new life in Christ is all about, right? Well, yes and no. What I'd forgotten is that in Christ God makes ALL THINGS new. I've learned not just that God wants to use you, but that God wants to use **all** of you. Everything. The good, the bad and the ugly. The stuff that we try so hard to hide or ignore God can redeem. That which is dead God can resurrect. So, I've tried my best to embrace that, embrace my past, and take ownership of it. I've tried to learn from whatever mistakes I might've made and use the experiences I'd tried so hard to leave behind. I think doing so has helped me to be a better man and, hopefully, a better pastor. I've tried very hard to be the pastor you **need** me to be even, at times at the expense of being the pastor you **want** me to be. As I've said, I love you all, but I love God more.

I'd like to leave you today with three things, lessons that I learned as part of the ordination process and that have been reinforced over the course of the last ten years. The first, is that no matter where you go, no matter how far away you run, no matter where you try and hide, God will find you.

Jonah is proof of that. And if my story and Jonah's story, especially the part about spending three days in the belly of a whale, tell us anything it's that running away only makes things worse and you'll soon find yourself where you started. The belly of my particular whale looked an awful lot like a car dealership showroom.

The second lesson is that God can use anyone. Look at Paul. He made it his life's work to persecute Christians. He even held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen and probably cheered them on. This guy ended up writing 28 percent of the New Testament. Someone actually counted and found that of the 179,011 total words in the original New Testament Greek Paul wrote 50,190 of them. How about that? I'll say it again, because it bears repeating, God can use **anyone**. God **can** and **will** use you if you allow Him to do so. And, forgive me for saying this but shame on you if you don't. Now, will allowing God to use you, work through you, change your life? Yep! It sure does and that scares people. We talked about this last week, Jesus says follow but isn't always clear on where or how. Jesus invites us to leave everything behind but without much promise as to what we'll get in return. And that's scary! Believe me – I get that. I will tell you that when I finally realized that God was calling me to be a pastor I was terrified on several levels. First and foremost I was deathly afraid of letting God down again. I was probably more afraid of letting Jane down again. But she reminded me then, and often reminds me now, that we need to trust God. I can and will say, without hesitation or reservation, that when we trust God our lives will be infinitely better for it! I believe with every fiber of my being. And I'll say this too, it doesn't matter how old you are or where you might be in your life, God can and will use you and you will be better for it. Those around you will be better for it. As I've said before and will continue to say, when God's done with you, He'll tell you in person, face-to-face.

The third and final lesson I want to share is that God has placed people in your life who can help you be the person He's calling you to be. Certainly we've all known pastors, Sunday school teachers, confirmation mentors, but it may not be that obvious. But it's our job to find out who that person is as part of discerning God's call for our lives. And I'll say it again if you don't, shame on you. We pride ourselves, at times for thinking we have it all figured out, for believing that we are strong enough to do things on our own. I certainly did. Not anymore.

You all know the old joke that if you want to hear God laugh tell Him your plan. I think that's part of the reason Jane and I named our dog Isaac which is based on the Hebrew word for laughter and I don't think it's a coincidence that we got him while I was in seminary. I learned the hard way, as Paul reminds us today, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and that God's weakness is stronger than human strength. I've made it my life's mission to preach God's Word and teach folks about the book that contains that Word, to share the love of that God, a love that managed to find me in amazing ways. I've promised to serve you with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. It's all I can do. It's what I've promised God I'd do all those years ago.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.