

*A young faithful farmer, standing in his field, observes a peculiar cloud formation in the sky above. The clouds form the letters G, P, and C, and he thinks they are a call from God: Go preach Christ!, is what he hears. And so, the farmer rushes to the clergy of his church and insists that he has been called to preach. Respectful of him and his enthusiasm, they invite him to step into the pulpit. That Sunday, the sermon is long, tedious, virtually incoherent. When it finally ends, the clergy sit in stunned silence. Finally, a wise deacon leans over and mutters to the would-be preacher, "Seems to me the clouds were saying 'Go Plant Corn.'"*\*\*

Just last week we heard God calling Samuel and Jesus calling his disciples, and we reflected on being found by God, and how comforting it is to be able to trust that God will always find us.

Today's lectionary calls our attention again to God's calling, but with emphasis on how we respond to that call, and what it is that gets in our way.

God calls us. Each and every one of us:

- to repent and to return to God,
- to follow, or be disciples
- to serve - both God and our neighbor, and
- to proclaim - to be people who profess faith in Jesus and share his grace and love with others.
- And as we strive to live into our calling, we must take time, alone and inside of community, to identify the particular gifts, talents, knowledge and experience with which we have been blessed, and how we might employ them in service to God, our church and one another. How our individual callings play out in our lives and communities varies greatly from person to person. While all people are called, not all are , called to the same expression of ministry.

We begin today with God calling his prophet, Jonah, to preach an invitation of repentance to Israel's enemy, Nineveh.

Jonah is a reluctant prophet of God (and I'm sure many of you know what it is to sometimes be a reluctant disciple). He is not reluctant out of disobedience to God, or even for fear of God, but because of his inability to *trust* in **God's Leading**, to trust in God's broader vision for humanity, especially when it conflicts with what he thinks he understand to be true.

He is sent by God to the people of Nineveh, to warn them of their impending doom and to offer them one last chance to repent and turn back to God. Although his understanding of his faith has taught him that no enemy of Israel could ever receive

God's divine mercy, and anticipating that Nineveh will not turn from their ways, Jonah complies. And surprise of all surprises, the people of Nineveh hear, listen and repent, putting on sackcloth.

Jonah is shocked, but what really sends him reeling is God's response to Nineveh. Never did Jonah anticipate God would change God's mind. Regardless of *why* the Ninevites turned back to God, even if their only motive was self-preservation, in God's eyes their act of repentance was sufficient for God to change his mind, to choose to give them life, and not to destroy them.

Reading ahead to chapter 4 of Jonah, we find that rather than being consoled and encouraged by God's generosity of grace and mercy, Jonah is livid. Certainly God's gone off his rocker! Jonah resents that God would "give in" to their enemy; he fails to understand or trust in God's vision and thus he remains trapped and angry in his own point of view.

Maybe we can relate? Perhaps we are more like Jonah than we would care to admit. With all that is going on in our world, it's easy to identify people or groups that we consider to be enemies of God and God's people; We witness those who are corrupt, dangerous, and whose actions or viewpoints sit contrary to what we imagine God desires. Like Jonah, we too are called to proclaim God's love & mercy to *all* people. Yes, even those people — not just those we would choose or that we think deserve it, but especially those who seem wholly undeserving, those for whom we struggle to have compassion.

Even within our own families, workplaces and communities, we can find it challenging to live out God's call to love and follow. We let the stories and excuses and our own rationale get in our way. Sometimes we may question God's generosity or wisdom, because we just can't understand how it is that folks whose actions cause great harm would be offered a second chance at forgiveness? If we're honest, we might admit that sometimes we just want people to get what they deserve (well at least, what we think they deserve).

But perhaps, we, like Jonah, have lost our perspective. We seem to easily forget the kindnesses and grace we have received when we have fallen off track. We no longer recall the forgiveness and second chances we've been given by God, We forget that each time we repent of our sins and turn back to God, every Sunday, that God meets us not with rejection, but with mercy and grace, and delight that we've come back.

The good news is that God's mercy and compassion will always exceed ours — and that's because God is God, and we are human. And yet, our God calls us to practice compassion and mercy; to be like God: quick to forgive and willing to extend God's transformative love without discretion or judgment. The Psalmist reminds us that we can

put our full trust in God, for God is our refuge, our strength, the one who whispers into the silence. When we fail to tend to others with compassion and mercy, it is we who become lost, not them.

The truth is that God stands *for* all people. God will always choose love first, and Jesus calls us back to God, again and again, because we all have a part to play. Even when others or the world would have us believe or insist that we are undeserving of grace or forgiveness, that we are beyond redemption, God's steadfast love and mercy prevails. Our God *is* a God of second chances, of new beginnings, the one who finds us in the mire, in the silence, and speaks into our listening to restore our souls.

As for our call, we may never know for sure exactly what is to come or how God might wish to use us. We cannot always understand in the present moment what is happening or why; we may think we hear a call, only to discover that God has other plans, or wants to use our gifts in ways that we haven't begun to imagine. Certainly, the more tightly we try to hold on to control, the less space there is for the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

But we can trust that God is always doing new things: Forgiving Nineveh; sending Jesus into the world; calling four simple fishermen to become disciples; and calling each of us into new expressions of ministry and service.

I encourage you to take some time this week to identify and name your gifts and talents — both by yourself and in conversation with others. Then, give some thought as to how might God be calling you to share your gifts in new ways or in new places? Some of us are called to Go Preach Christ, while others of us are called to Go Plant Corn. Whatever it is that God is calling you to, try to be like the fishermen, who without hesitation, were a yes to God. Certainly they didn't know just what their yes would mean, but we can imagine that Jesus saw in them hearts hungry for God, and gifts to share: like preparation, organization, observation and patience — Gifts that would uniquely prepare them to become the founders and leaders of the church. We can trust that when we embrace our discipleship, God will reveal to us the knowledge, understanding and insights we need, so that combined with the gifts and talents we bring to the table, will help us to discern our calling, and to step into it boldly, in faith.

*\*\* Found on [www.Christianity today.com/Gordon MacDonald](http://www.Christianity today.com/Gordon MacDonald)*