

## Following – Yes or No?

Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021 – Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

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Have you ever bargained with God? I have, I can remember at least three significant occasions when I sought to bargain with God. In the late 1980's when I was finishing university, I was beginning to sense a call to overseas mission – I did some investigation and then said to God, let me just live life a bit and then I will follow that idea up again. My Dad has also said he didn't want me living with 'cannibals' somewhere far away. By the end of that decade, I had started theological studies. About 10 years after I was ordained a prestigious church in Adelaide interviewed me, I flew over for a weekend but on the way home said to God no, my Mum was very ill and asked me not to go. Then when my Mum was dying, I remember saying to God, if you let her live then I will go back and follow up on all those things I ran from. Another bargain I tried to make.

Jonah didn't even try to bargain. He ran as far away as he could get. Tarsish was as far from Nineveh as you could get. There was no way Jonah wanted to go to Nineveh which was a large city in Assyria, the empire that had destroyed his homeland. There was no way he wanted God to save them after all that had happened.

We know his story, he hops onto a boat, the boat begins to sink, the sailors try to figure out who is causing the problem, and in the end, Jonah is thrown overboard. Then the storm calms, the sailors give thanks to God and become believers. Would Jonah have thought that possible? Even whilst running from God, people are converted. Then a large fish swallows Jonah and for three days and nights, Jonah prays for release of some kind. He gets release alright – spewed up on the shore. God then asks him again to go to Nineveh, he does but he only does the bare minimum God asks. He walks through the city giving them a seven word sermon. Unexpectedly the people listen and lo and behold they repent and God changes his mind and forgives the people.

Jonah now sulking finds some God given shade as a plant grows up to cover him. By the next day the plant has withered and his shade is gone. Now he is angry but God confronts him about his feelings and his right to them. God slowly shows him that just as Jonah can move from anger to kindness and back again so can God. God can change his mind and forgive. God's love is gracious, full of mercy and he is free to forgive those who deserve the opposite. Look how he treated Jonah even after he had fled.

Jonah and I learnt that God gets you anyway. Despite our resistance, our lack of any spectacular abilities, stuffing it up even when we think we have it right, God will still accomplish his purposes, with or without us. God loves people just where they are. Those of us who feel called need to put aside our judgement.

The kind of following we find in Mark's gospel is all together different. Jesus arrives announcing his message – repent for the time is now, the Kairos moment is here. Repent in this context means turning around, doing a 360, changing your mind and heart. As he walks by Jesus sees four fishermen going about their everyday tasks. Jesus calls them and they leave their tasks, their jobs, their families immediately. There is something irresistible in His call. Simon and Andrew were probably poor fishermen with nothing much to leave behind – they probably didn't own boats or have staff. James and John leave behind a business, their father and staff. With no particular training, or qualifications, or time to reflect they all follow Jesus. Following on a journey where their skills already gained will be used, where Jesus will set the example and give them whatever on the job training, they need. The destination is unclear but they leave

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their nets on an adventure. Unlike Jonah and myself they don't resist or bargain with Jesus. Two sets of brothers form a new community around Jesus. There is no reluctance, there will be risks, but they just get on with it.

Both our stories today show us that God calls us from and to unexpected places. Jonah ends up in Nineveh despite his best intentions. I end up in ministry despite my attempts at making bargains. Jesus picks some rugged fishermen working by the sea of Galilee, the place, where, many thought, nothing good could ever come. For Jonah, myself and those fishermen there was a moment of opportunity (Kairos) – Jonah and I evaded it as best we could but it came back to bite us, as it were. The four fishermen, they grabbed the opportunity and embarked on a journey they would have never thought possible (both the good and bad it contained). God seems to always use unlikely people to spread his message of love and acceptance – people who want to run away, average ordinary people, people with no particular training or skills, people with a bit of enthusiasm and willingness to undertake an adventure, a journey. These stories tell us that God's love is universal and his first thought is to show mercy and forgive – he forgave the people of Nineveh, he gave Jonah and myself a second opportunity.

The reading from Mark reminds us that this following business is a journey, we are on the road, heading somewhere, making mistakes along the way (read the gospels to find out how often that little group of disciples got it wrong). Jesus calls us to follow, to be on the way, on the road, to be moving not standing still.

At Footscray Baptist Church this year our challenge is to think about mission really seriously. Where and to whom is God calling us to share the good news? Maybe it is to a place and people that we are a bit wary of. We will have to leave some things behind, we will have to leave our security. It will be risky. We don't need qualifications or extra training, rather we need a willingness to follow as best we can. As Dr Suess says – Oh the places we will go! Amen.