

## JANUARY 14<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Samuel 3b-10, 19    I Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20    John 1:35-42

Nothing creates more interest for Scripture's original readers than the "call narratives" many of our sacred authors include in their writings. When Yahweh or the gospel Jesus asks someone to be a disciple, everyone listens carefully to the details. Their interest isn't hard to understand. Those original readers feel called in a similar way. Though times and circumstances differ, several elements are always the same.

First, the divine caller usually demands the person who is called "move." Neither Jesus nor Yahweh says, "Stay there! Don't move a muscle! Just keep doing what you're doing!" Movement is always entailed, either physical or psychological or both. No one responds to such a call without experiencing change.

Second, the individual who's called is expected to follow not some intellectual ideals or principles, but a real person. When we deal with any person, there's always something new to learn about him or her. Nothing stays the same. Those not open to the person aren't open to the call.

Third, whoever is called is now expected to put his or her security in the person doing the calling. Whatever or whoever they consistently fell back on before they now push into the background. They trust only Yahweh or Jesus. Their personal strength shifts from former places, people and ideas to someone completely "other."

Samuel discovers in today's first reading, when God calls there's no hesitation, no thinking it over. Eli correctly instructs the boy, ". . . If you are called, reply, 'Speak, Yahweh, for your servant is listening.'" In a very deep sense, if he's not already listening for a call, he'll probably pull a "Sgt. Schultz" and hear *nothing* even though the call is coming loud and clear. Eli and Samuel's misunderstanding tells us we can easily mistake the actual caller for someone else. We'd better know whom and what to listen for, else we'll think it's just a figment of our imagination; something we can slough off at will.

The call might even come through someone with whom we're already familiar but are now looking at from a different perspective. That seems to be what happens in today's gospel pericope. Along with Andrew and Simon, Jesus already appears to be one of the Baptizer's followers when John points to him and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

Now because of John's leadership and authority, whatever this Galilean carpenter says and does takes on a deeper meaning. When he, for instance, asks, "What are you looking for?" he's referring not just to an immediate need; in this context, he's asking the pair, "What do you want out of life?"

The two eventually discover Jesus' "Come" is an invitation to become a new person. He calls them to go beyond their here and now and uncover a part of themselves they've never before noticed. That's why he quickly changes Simon's name to "Rock." Those who respond to God's call not only uncover more and more about God, they also uncover more and more about themselves.

That's exactly what happened when Paul responded to the risen Jesus' call on the Damascus Road. He not only discovered the Christ was present in those he was persecuting, he also discovered he/she was also present in him. No longer did he, as a good Jew, have to regularly visit the Jerusalem temple. Once he answers Christ's call and moves to a new frame of mind, he discovers his own body ". . . is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . ." What he thought outside himself is actually inside himself.

Hard to convince someone of such a wonder who's never said "Yes!" to the risen Jesus. But, on the other hand . . . .

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## JANUARY 21<sup>ST</sup>, 2018: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 I Corinthians 7:29-31 Mark 1:14-20

We spend so much time arguing about whether a person can live in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights that we actually forget why the author of Jonah originally wrote his well-known book. Scholars for a long time have concluded these small three chapters aren't to be taken literally. People read and saved them not because of their biological marvels, but because of their theological message. I often tell my students since the demise of Monty Python the only group who can do justice to Jonah is the Saturday Night Live crew. Yet even though the writer chose to convey his theology through classic sarcasm, his message is one of the most biting in all of Scripture.

It, like today's other two readings, revolves around conversion. How does one get from point A to point B, not geographically but psychologically? Our sacred authors presume only those who continually move from one point to another have true biblical faith. The rest are just treading water.

Biblical faith is constantly moving; it never stops growing and evolving. Unlike the catechism faith many of us grew up with, it isn't a static experience; a specific amount of dogmas and teachings we're to memorize and eventually "believe in." The only movement I can remember back then consisted in each catechism we studied containing more pages than the prior one. My faith grew because my catechism grew. Yet no matter how much I studied, it didn't lead to conversion. Though I knew more, I still stayed in the same basic place.

In many ways we're looking in a mirror when we hear about Jonah. Everyone in the book goes through a change – the sailors, Ninevites, animals, even Yahweh – except Jonah. He insists on maintaining the same frame of mind until the non-bitter end. Jonah's author directs his book to the "unchangeable believers" among us.

It's important to note that Yahweh doesn't send the prophet to these notorious Ninevite sinners with a message of repentance. On the contrary, it's a message of doom: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!" But after Jonah proclaims it, the unexpected happens. Not only do they repent, their sudden turnabout forces Yahweh to repent.

Of course Yahweh's behavior creates huge problems for us "Greek-thinking" people. How can God go back on God's word and still be God? The great Hans Walter Wolff once answered that question with one of the deepest biblical insights I've ever encountered: "God doesn't have to be faithful to God's word," the famous Scripture scholar said, "as long as God's faithful to God's people." In other words, when God's people repent, God repents.

The gospel Jesus learned that lesson well. He makes constant conversion a condition for carrying on his ministry. This itinerant preacher's basic "stump speech" is simple: To experience the "kingdom of God" – God working effectively in one's life – one must "repent," pull off a 180-degree switch in her or his value system. What once was on the outskirts of one's dos and don'ts is now front and center, and vice versa. He's a demanding leader. Those who can't (or won't) change day by day can't experience God day by day.

That change is certainly behind Jesus' promise to his first four followers, "I will make you fishers of people." He's giving them a brand new focus in their lives, opening a door they never knew existed.

Probably few of us will experience the five-fold turnabout Paul speaks of in today's I Corinthians passage. To say the least, that's a little drastic. But the possibility is there for everyone. Who knows what will happen when we agree to convert?

There's no "off button" on that machine.