

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Jonah 1:1-3, and 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

What are the choices that have shaped your life, and all that has come after? Choices. We make them all the time. Sometimes we are aware of our choices and their weight, or the choices of others that affect us. Other times we make our choices habitually without thinking or driven by enculturated assumptions. Are there are choices you are proud of? Are there choices you would like another go at? And I want to ask, intermixed with these other choices, have you also made choices to turn to Christ for grace, or forgiveness, or hope, or love, or purpose. And how has the turning to Christ shaped all these other choices in your life?

I ask a lot of questions, I know. But I have been thinking about choices, and how choices shape our journeys, shape how we perceive the world and live in the world. I have been thinking about choices because Jesus, having been baptized in the Jordan and hearing the voice from heaven, and having the dove descend upon him, now comes along and invites these fishermen to a life-altering choice. He invites them to follow him and fish for people, to change the trajectory of their lives, to alter all the choices that come after.

Come and follow. Choose. Choices don't typically happen in a vacuum, however. Certain choices shape our experiences and our future choices. Choices shape our perceptions and can make us either open or closed off to future choices. It makes me wonder what choices came before. What sets the stage that made this invitation to follow and fish for people so compelling to Simon and Andrew, and James and John? What earlier forces and choices made them ready to choose to leave their trade and follow this unfolding path of discipleship.

I was supposed to be an architect. That was my early inclination and plan. I grew up around the building business, my father built custom kitchens and woodworking. I built myself a drafting table in my teens, drew house plans for fun, demonstrating that my nerdy tendencies began quite young. But this inner pull to ministry and to making a difference in other people's lives seem to overtake the impulse to learn the architectural trade. And so, I started making small steps, small choices, to move in the direction of youth ministry, testing the call and the force of that inner pull.

It led me eventually into full-time ministry and in a direction where my career and life choices were so closely bound to my faith, to my relationship with Christ, to

my sense of being faithful to God's voice and presence in my life. Career and discipleship have been tightly intertwined for me. Now I'm well aware that for most, the choice to follow Christ does not involve a career change or a ministry career. But I wonder how this journey of following Christ has affected the way you have made choices, how has Christ affected how you fulfill your calling and roles in the world. Whether you are a banker or a real estate agent or a teacher, how has the journey of following Christ shaped the way you have operated? I ask these things because I believe the path of discipleship, the journey of faith and forgiveness and love is one that ought to shape our choices, shape the way we see ourselves and our role in the world.

What sets the stage that made this invitation so compelling for Simon and Andrew, for James and John that they would leave the nets? That James and John would walk away from the family business? Come and follow me. And that choice, would lead to future choices. Like a doctor called to help and heal, and sworn to the Hippocratic oath, there is a narrowing of the range of choices. Can a doctor choose who they wish to help? Can he or she choose to treat effectively only those they like, or agree with, or look like, or vote like? Like a teacher who does not get to choose which kids to teach and assist in their learning challenges. As a disciple of Christ, we are led in a direction where the choices narrow. Can we serve the Christ of forgiveness and live by grudges? Can we follow the Christ who loves deeply even those who harmed him and harbor hate? Can we follow the Christ who heals and be content to harm one another? Can we follow the Christ who gave his life for others and live only for our own interests?

For the disciples, the choice to follow Christ sets a trajectory. And small choices after big choices will continue to reinforce that trajectory. After our brief gospel reading, the very next thing Mark records is that they follow him immediately to Capernaum, to the Synagogue, and they hear Jesus teach with authority, and they are awestruck, and then came, Mark writes, "a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this?"" I consider this the "we're not in Kansas anymore," moment. I can imagine Peter and Andrew taking glances at the door. They likely don't know what to make of this moment yet. But, as they follow Jesus, they are on a trajectory of slowly coming into line with Jesus' impulses and choices and possibilities.

In Frost's poem, he presents these two roads. He says in multiple ways that the paths were equally fair, had equal wear, equal appeal. And the poet muses that given he must choose, maybe he'll come back another day and try the other. But then there is this great line that suggests the way our choices shape future choices. "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back." Choices shape our future choices. And even if we could get back to the same fork in the road, we would be different people, it would be a different choice. How is Christ shaping the way we see the world and interact in the world? Because like a doctor who accepts the Hippocratic oath, the path of following Christ narrows the range of future choices.

I say these things, and I suggest some things about following Christ's trajectory, but I suppose there is nothing that says it will always play out how I think it should. I guess we ought to acknowledge that other factors can shape our impressions and choices, and way leading on to way, the trajectory can play out differently. In reality, we can do otherwise. Many an injustice has occurred with the bible in hand. I just listened to a book that recounted the history of slavery and Jim Crow and lynching and its ongoing effects, a history well documented and one which can make one ill. I wonder what set of events, choices, or process of enculturation can lead people to consider such inhumanity acceptable or reasonable. What set of factors cause us to be so callous, to enjoy the benefits of society while we work to bar others from the same benefits at the same time?

I think of Jonah. He is a prophet of God. Therefore, we ought to expect certain things from him. Jonah is concerned with Israel and God's blessing on Israel. So when God tells him to go preach to the Ninevites, the cruel captors and enemies of Israel, so that they can repent and find mercy, he bristles. Like a doctor who decides to defy his Hippocratic oath, Jonah makes a judgment about just deserts, about who deserves what, and he inserts his choices into the scene. He takes this word God has given him that is intended for the Ninevites, and he runs with it, thinking he can hold it, to withhold it. Instead of taking it to Nineveh, he boards a ship to Tarshish, to the opposite end of the known world, attempting to take the Ninevites' hope with him. It feels a little bit like comic strip humor. Perhaps it is hyperbole and farce, or perhaps it gets interpreted that way because such a brutal expression of humanity is hard to accept, that this prophet of the Lord is so bent on a people's destruction.

Jonah's inclination is in conflict with his calling. But God intervenes through the great fish. God intercedes for both Jonah's sake and for the sake of the people of Nineveh, drawing Jonah back into line with the calling that ought to shape and direct his inclinations and choices. This little spat between Jonah and God,

however, will continue into chapter four. Jonah four is perhaps an often-overlooked part of this story, but very much worth the read because Jonah continues to pout and stew in his discontent that God acted on behalf of these people. Jonah is slow to come into line with God's inclinations.

I wonder if we are not more like Jonah than we like to admit. But even so, as way leads on to way, God intervenes in Jonah's journey, and into our own journeys, giving us new windows of perspective, new chances to repent and to come follow. It takes time to have our way of responding to the events of life shaped by the way Jesus responds. For these disciples, it will take three years of walking in step everyday. And they will still have moments of arguing who is highest ranked among them and who should get the best seat at dinner. When Jesus is crucified, they will want to give up and they will try to go back to fishing, but it won't stick. "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back."

Now, I have asked a set of questions this morning. I have asked concerning your story, journey, and the choices or events that have shaped it. So, I recognize that such questions might conjure painful choices or chapters. Some choices you might like to have another go at, or forget altogether. But way leads on to way. And the good news is that those invitations to follow did not just go to people had their lives all in order. That call also went to men and women whose stories too had chapters they might want to change. There were women who came along for whom circumstances had not gone well, and they were blamed and stigmatized for what happened. There were tax collectors who got caught in the gears of multiple allegiances, trying to be Israelite and serve Rome. There were prodigals of various stripes. But each is invited to follow, invited to make a choice that might redeem and redirect the journey.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, affirms that God can take your complicated journey and work all things for good for those who Love the Lord and who want to live according to his purposes.

Come and follow me, and I will make you fish for people. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. This is not to say that choices and callings are easy. They are difficult. Choices keep us up at night sometimes. We would love to take the easy road sometimes. When that man in the synagogue started foaming at the mouth, I wonder if Simon and Andrew didn't consider if they were hasty in their choice and want then and there to go back to their boat. And sometimes our journeys take a longer and more circuitous route. "The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time," because obviously the first time was a little bumpy, "saying,

‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’”

I invite you to look back on your journey today with gratitude. Look for how way has led on to way, and how Christ has and is shaping your perceptions of the world, and choices of how to live in the world. But I also invite you to be open to where we are like Jonah, taking up the mantle and the call and yet living by other impulses. And I pray, that we might continue on this path of following the Christ until our choices and responses and inclinations are fully patterned after the one who invites us to come. And may we feel the joy and resolve of those final lines of Frost’s poem. “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”

Jonah 1:1-3, and 3:1-5, 10

1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1: 14-20

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

(Mt 4:18–22; Lk 5:1–11)

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

