



# Fr. Samuel's Homily

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
January 21, 2018**

Wouldn't it be nice if God would make it clear to us exactly what he wants of us? Wouldn't it be nice if God's call in our lives came with perfect clarity? Well, in the story of Jonah, that is exactly what happened. And what did Jonah do? Rather than go to Nineveh as God instructed him he went in exactly the opposite direction. On one level that was perfectly understandable. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and the Assyrians were, as one biblical historian put it, the Nazi's of the ancient world. They were a conquering nation and in 722 BC invaded and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So Jonah was being instructed to go into the very heart of enemy territory with a message that invincible Assyria would be destroyed. He must have thought that it was the craziest thing that he had ever heard. We, of course, know what happened. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish. We do not know where that was but we do know that, in accord with the story, it was far away. The ship encountered rough seas and the crew was fearful of sinking. Jonah took the blame for the storm since he was disobeying God and he assumed that God was punishing him. Generously and penitently he suggested to the sailors that they just throw him overboard. They did. And, as we know, the story, from there, told of his sojourn in the belly of a whale who eventually coughed him up.

Jonah, having had time to contemplate his disobedience, and being sorry for having tried to run away from God, went to Nineveh and did as he was told. Amazingly he was only one day though with what would have been a three day walk through the city when the people and the rulers of the city repented of their evil ways. God, then, decided not to destroy them. All was well for the people of Nineveh but not so with Jonah, but that is another story.

In the passage that we heard today from the Gospel of Mark we see an opposite response to being clearly called by God. Jesus told his new disciples to follow him. They did not hesitate. They did it. Taking these two stories of being called by God together what can we learn for our own lives?

One very important thing that I have learned in my own life and from helping others discern calls from God in their lives, is that when God's word calls us God puts our lives at a crossroads. We can ignore him and continue stubbornly with life as we think that we want to live it, as if God does not really matter, or does not really care what we do, or maybe as if God does not exist at all. Or we can open ourselves to him. We can respond to him with trust and willingness to obey. The issue with that, however, is that we will be leaving our old life behind for a new life. And where that life will lead us is never spelled out for us. The disciples, for example, did not know what was to come. They did not know what joys and sufferings that they would encounter in their new lives. They just knew that Jesus called them to follow him, nothing more.

As for us, the decision that we make when we believe that God might be calling us often depends on what is going on with us when that call comes. We all have things that motivate us and which determine how we respond to challenges, and God's call is always a challenge. When faced with a challenge to take on something new we tend to try to figure things out through our imaginations. And our imaginations can go in one of two directions. We might, as Jonah did, imagine the worst. He was asked to trust God and to go into enemy territory on what seemed like a fool's mission. What would happen to him? His fleeing in the opposite direction indicates that he imagined the worst. On top of that he may well not have wanted to warn the Assyrians of impending doom because they were the enemy. It was actually in his self-interest that they be destroyed.

The disciples, on the other hand, were ready and willing. They were looking for the Messiah. John the Baptist had prepared his disciples for that. With the Roman occupation of Israel it was the hope of the Jewish people. So when Jesus came they saw in him possibility, probably for positive political action since that was what the Jewish people expected in a Messiah. Like Jonah, they did not really understand where the call was going to lead them but, unlike Jonah, they imagined the best. They trusted in the call and they followed Jesus into a life they could never have imagined.

For us, most of the time, the clarity of being called is not quite like what Jonah or the disciples experienced. However, the call is there. God continually calls us in the contexts of our lives as we live them to the life that we are created to live. We can "hear" that call, when we are willing to stop, listen and open our hearts to whatever it is that God might be saying to us. It comes in all sorts of ways but those three things—stopping, listening, and opening our hearts to something beyond ourselves—are essential, both to knowing that God is calling and to our hearing God in whatever way he speaks to us. As I mentioned in my homily last week we have to move apart of the nosiness of our lives to a place of quiet. Because it is in the quiet of our hearts that we can hear God's voice, and only in the quiet of our hearts can we truly know that it is Him.

What follows when we listen, hear and respond to God's call for us? I can share one small example from my own experience. After I finally gave in to the call to convert to the Catholic faith, after a rather long time dithering about it and, then, the subsequent call to enter into priestly formation in seminary, I was visiting with my mother at her home in Pennsylvania. We were talking about the changes that had recently happened in my life. As we concluded that conversation, my mother, who was not Catholic said, "Well, there must be something to this Catholic religion. You are a much nicer person than you used to be." She was absolutely right. When we respond to God's call in our lives we become new persons. Actually we move on to becoming the people God created us to be. For some of us that may make us nicer. For all of us life becomes a far richer experience than anything that we might have imagined before. And it continues in that way, as it did for the disciples, as we move deeper and deeper into the experience of deeper possibilities both within us and in one another. And all that it takes is our being willing to stop, to listen and to open our hearts to Jesus' invitation to us to follow him.