

“Learning How to Follow Jesus”

Jonah 3:1–5, 10, Mark 1:14–20

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Today’s two scripture readings seem to deliver different stories, but they have a common spiritual message that is simple and clear: If you want to change your life, you should be sensitive to God’s call and follow Him! You are not the ruler of your life—God is! Let God be your guide by surrendering your will and giving your full trust and obedience to Him.

How is your life going? You may not be where you want to be or you may have had some setbacks due to some life stumbles and challenges that you have encountered. Do you feel that you are stuck in your life? Pastor Joel Osteen says it well: “If you live in the past, you’ll get stuck where you are. What’s in your past is not nearly as important as what is in your future. You may think you’re surrounded by the enemy, but the truth is the enemy is surrounded by our God. God is bigger than your opposition, greater than your sickness, more powerful than your enemies.”¹ Life is constantly changing and may leave you behind if you are not running forward. We will be left behind if we stop running forward but stay in the same place. Do you remember what the Red Queen said to Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*? In explaining the nature of Wonderland, she said, “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.” Jesus Christ calls us to follow Him and not to stay in the past; it is an invitation to join the adventure of life with Jesus in courage and hope. He invites us all to join the adventurous journey and to move forward to whatever it will be!

The first Scripture reading is about the story of Jonah. Many of you are familiar with Jonah’s background and his character in the Old Testament narratives. In the story, when the prophet Jonah wanted to run away from God’s call, he ended up on a boat in the sea. In the end, he was thrown into the sea and was swallowed by a whale. My son Jacob loves this image! What happened was that God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians, and deliver God’s message that they should repent their wicked ways and turn back to God. Otherwise, their city would be overthrown. But Jonah didn’t want to do anything to help the Assyrians because they had destroyed his people, the Samaritans. However, God had a larger plan than Jonah’s personal emotions and

¹ This quote is found in pastor Joel Osteen’s twitter feed. <https://twitter.com/JoelOsteen>, accessed Jan. 19, 2018.

wishes. One of the spiritual insights in Jonah's story is to acknowledge that God is the ruler of life and the guide who gives us direction and gives us guidance when we wonder which way we need to go. God wants us to be tuned in to Him as we take our steps forward. The purpose of deepening our Christian faith through and with spiritual disciplines and participating in worship and Bible study is to feel God's presence in our individual lives, discern God's will, and find God's guidance so we will go with God as we continue on our uncertain life journeys. Sometimes we feel that there is light, but it seems foggy, dark, and gloomy on our path as we live out our life. We feel scared, afraid, and too fearful to step forward. God reminds the prophet Jonah and the people of Nineveh not to rely on their own ways and direction but to turn back to God and follow His way!

The second scripture reading is about Jesus' calling people to follow him. If you read this story carefully, you will find an interesting point in the people's reaction when Jesus called them to join his vision and dream for the Kingdom of God. When Jesus saw two guys mending their fishing nets beside the sea, he said to them, "Follow me!" And they immediately dropped everything they were doing and followed Jesus. The Bible didn't record any backstories about the fishermen's curiosity before they took action. For example, they might have wondered, "Who are you?" "What is your blueprint for the new movement or the Kingdom of God?" or another important question, "Where are you going?" The point is not whether Jesus' ministry is marketable or will be successful; the point is these men's trust, dedication, and full commitment to going with Jesus and following him even in an unknown future direction. A well-known United Methodist bishop, William H. Willimon, addresses this in his one of the sermons, which is titled "Revolution!" He points out, "We are not told that these people have any training in discipleship, or that they have any particular natural gifts for following Jesus. . . . Yet Jesus gets the kingdom of God in motion by calling a couple of ordinary folks to be his disciples."² He further challenges us with these prophetic words:

Americans are big on their decisions, the sum of their choices. They construe their lives as their self-creations, their shrewd concoctions. But today's story invites us all to consider our lives as the sum of God's decisions, a project of the living Christ, something that Jesus makes and molds through his relentless reach toward us. . . . The life you live is not your own. You are named, claimed, and commandeered. God has plans

² Rev, William H Willimon's sermon script, "Revolution!" An excerpt from *The Minister Annual Manual 2012* (Logos Production Inc.: Minnesota, January 22, 2012)

for you. God has a job for you. This is good news because the saddest of all sad things, in this world, is an uncalled and unclaimed life. Now, go live out your calling. . . . All God has, all God wants for the world, God's great, expanding kingdom, all of that is in the hands of a bunch of amateurs. It's a strange way to run a railroad, but this is the way God gets what God wants. "Follow me!"

Jesus is still calling us to follow him, dreaming together and helping him as change-makers for the transformation of the world in both small and big things. Will you follow Jesus?

One of my favorite old hymns is "I have Decided to Follow Jesus." This song goes like this;

1. I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.
2. The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.
3. Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.

We Christians are called to follow God in Christ Jesus and to transform ourselves from an old being to a new being. We are also called to change our community, society, and even the world to a better place through our mission and outreach. Jesus is inviting you and our church to become his disciples, to bring a positive change and signs of hope to our neighborhood using our gifts and talents. Do you dare to follow Jesus?

Just as the Bible describes the fishermen immediately leaving their nets, we are called and invited to follow Jesus in boldness and hope. Give him your full trust and follow him! Amen.