

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2012

I don't like call waiting. I don't have it myself, but I find myself bristling when I am in the middle of a conversation, and hear that click that signals someone is trying to get through. And then the other person says, "Oh, sorry, hold..." and... gone. I suspect, however, that God is a God who delights in call waiting, since interrupting people in the middle of things seems to be the way God works.

Take the story of Jonah. There's Jonah, going along living his life, when suddenly he gets this call, "Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it." Of course, Jonah does not seem to have subscribed to call waiting. As far as he is concerned, the God of call waiting can wait. God says go east, and Jonah heads west. God says deliver a message of fire, and Jonah heads for the water. God says go, and Jonah says no.

The reading we heard today is the *second* time God tells Jonah, "Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you." Jonah finally goes, but only after being swallowed, incarcerated for three days, and then thrown up by a whale. It takes God half of the story to get Jonah on the scene. But when Jonah finally allows God to work through him, something wonderful happens.

No sooner has Jonah started going through the city, only a single day's walk through an "enormously large city" that "took three days to go through it," proclaiming a message of doom: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!" and what happens? These sophisticated city dwellers believe, repent, fast, exchange their garments for sackcloth, and stoop down in ashes. This interrupting God calls and they pick up, setting aside all else, including their evil ways, and turn to answer. Not that this had much of an impact on Jonah. He thought God's righteous will to destroy sinners had just melted into slush. But God defined it differently: not slush but mercy.

We see the same pattern in the Gospel. Jesus comes proclaiming the Gospel of God. And it is not in a manner that says: Excuse me, but do you have a minute or even half a minute? When you do, there are some things I'd like you to hear. Rather, it plunges into people's lives with an immediacy that provides no options: "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." In other words, now is the time to turn to God. Or, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Time is running out."

And we see this message carried over into action when Jesus runs into Peter and Andrew and James and John. There they are working their trade and – wham! "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people." Here you have Peter and Andrew chatting it up with their father, Zebedee, and call waiting comes in: Follow me. And they do.

It seems our God is a collaborator. God in Jesus calls people to work with him, not just to sit and learn, not just to be passive spectators but active coworkers. Dropping their nets, they go off with him. Perhaps we have heard this story too often, and it bounces off all of us. When they dropped those nets, they were leaving not just their jobs but their families, and their fathers, Jonah and Zebedee. Jesus walks into their lives, summons, and they answer.

And it does not prove to be easy. It meant dropping more than their nets. They eventually had to leave behind their desires for power and prestige, their dreams of sitting on his right and left, to become servants. They had to leave behind their religious sense of right and wrong to follow a man who ate with tax collectors and sinners, and who kept company with people they were told to avoid: prostitutes, the riff raff, lepers, the unclean, even a Gentile here and there.

God comes, God calls, God sends. God interrupts our lives again and again. But the choice is ours, as it was Jonah's, Peter's and Andrew's. God is a God of call waiting.

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