



This morning we come to the third of the four messages from the book of Jonah. Next week ends our series of messages from this very short, but powerful book.

Today I want to talk to you about calling. The book of Jonah covers a lot of themes, and one of them is the calling that God places upon us.

Follow along as we read Jonah 3:1-10 –

*1 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time:*

*2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”*

*3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.*

*4 Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”*

*5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*

*6 When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.*

*7 This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:*

*“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.*

*8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.*

*9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*

*10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring the destruction he had threatened.*

I have two things to say today, the first of which is –

## 1. *You Are Called by God.*

Tanya has two younger brothers. I first met her brother Mike, the older of the two, in May of 1978, a couple of months after Tanya and I began dating. Mike had come to help Tanya move her things home for the summer. I was in the lobby of her dorm when he came walking in. He was, I think, a senior in high school at the time. I can still see him walking into the lobby, with all of the 17-year-old swagger he could muster – which was quite a bit – and his long hair swinging as he walked (it was the 70s – we all had long hair!). Mike walked right to me, stood in front of me, and without any other comment spoke his first ever words to me – *So. You're going to be a minister, huh? How do you know you're called? Did God whisper in your ear or something?* I don't remember all of my answer, but I think it may have started with the words *listen here, punk.*

But it's a legitimate question – how does one know God has called them?

In one sense, it's an easy question to answer *how did you know you were called*, because everyone is called. I talk to a lot of people who feel they aren't doing anything important with their lives. They will say *I'm just a \_\_\_\_\_* (fill in the blank with whatever vocation you choose). There's often a sense of regret in their voice, as though they believe they aren't doing anything meaningful with their life. But we must remember that our worth and our value are not based on our vocation, certainly it is not in the eyes of God. In America we measure ourselves too broadly by vocation, but that's not God's measurement. God desires to use us – wherever we are and whatever we do – to live his love and his kingdom values. Being called by God means far more than occupying a vocational ministry.

The disciples, called by Jesus, are an interesting example of this. They had no theological training. We don't know, in fact, if they had any kind of religious training. They probably attended the synagogue, but we don't know if they did so with any regularity, or at all. I think it's very, very significant that Jesus did not call his closest followers from the religious class. Not one of them came from that group. Sometimes, when I sit in minister's meetings I understand why. We're kind of a weird group, we ministers. One of the reasons we're kind of weird is because we live in a bubble and while we experience a lot of reality because of what we do, we're shielded from a lot of reality as well. You are out there living in the middle of some very difficult realities, balancing life and work and so many other matters. Remember, then, that God can use you where you are. You don't have to go to seminary. You don't have to be ordained. You don't have to have a special talent. You don't have to get up in front of a group of people and preach. You only have to be who you are, where you are, and allow God to speak through your life.

Sometimes, I think that when I speak some people expect certain things from ministers. *That's just what he's supposed to say. Pay no attention to him.* But when you speak, or act, it carries a lot of weight. People hear you, or watch you, and think, *they are just like me, so if faith is important to them, maybe I need to take a closer look at it.*

In May, I traveled with Tanya on one of her work trips. She travels a lot for her work and I try to accompany her once or twice a year, when it's a welcoming location. She invited me to travel with her to North Dakota last November, but I declined. I hope it doesn't make me a bad husband to decide against traveling with her in the cold! When it came to the warm weather of May – and a trip to Myrtle Beach and Orlando – well, I was all in for that trip. When we arrived in Myrtle Beach it turned out it was Biker's Week there. I was once a motorcycle rider, many years ago, but I gave it up because of safety concerns. Even in my motorcycle days I did not look like a biker. I have no tattoos, don't look good in leather, and I'm not at all intimidating. As I watched long lines of bikers ride through Myrtle Beach, I was surprised at how many of them, on the backs of their leather vests, had logos for Christian biker organizations. I was glad to see those logos, because those bikers could reach other bikers much more effectively than I could. We need bikers who can reach other bikers. We need athletes who can reach other athletes. We need teachers who can reach other teachers. We need politicians who can reach other politicians. And so on, and so on.

It's really a shame that Jonah could not embrace his calling, and that it was a source of misery for him. I think his biggest problem was he was afraid of the people to whom he was called, which leads to our second point –

## 2. *Do Not Be Held Captive By Fear.*

Some of you will ask me after church, *why do you mention fear so often?* I do so because it is such a powerful factor in our lives. We fear many things in life. For Jonah, he feared what he did not know, he feared what he did not understand, and he feared what was different.

I am always fearful of something. Standing up here each week is something that is not easy for me, and often makes me feel fearful. I fear that I am not bringing the words you need to hear or that I am not accurately interpreting the text from which I am preaching, among other things. So what I have done, for many years, is to find something to do that helps me to overcome my fears, such as ride roller coasters. It's not that I enjoy the ride so much (although I do like to go fast, as anyone who has ever taken a ride in a car with me will know) as it is the sense that I have overcome a fear. Roller coasters give me a headache, they bang me around so that my neck gets sore, and I'm dizzy and walk funny when I get off of one, but I feel like I've conquered a fear after I complete the ride. One time, when we were traveling, I went to a big water park. I love water parks; they do not, thankfully, scare me. I was walking around the park and there was an attraction that caught my attention. *Swim with sharks* a sign said. I don't know why that intrigued me. Perhaps it was because I thought, *this is a great way to overcome fear.* There was a park information booth across from the entrance of the attraction so I walked over to talk to the guy who was working in the booth. There was a notebook there with pictures and descriptions of the sharks, stingrays, and other fish in the attraction, along with several waivers I would be required to sign if I got in the water with the sharks.

After reading the waivers, I had to ask the obvious question – *has there been any problems?* And by problems I meant *have the sharks eaten anyone?* He said, *um, no.* What kind of answer is that? *Um, no.* It's like he had to think about it for a moment. If a shark had bitten someone you know the answer right away. Answering in that way made me wonder if he was uncertain about answering honestly. So I do what I often do when I'm nervous, which is to make a joke, and said, *well, there's always a first time, right?* He didn't answer that question at all, which did not exactly fill me with confidence. So I made the wise choice – I decided swimming with those sharks was exactly what I should do.

I put on my snorkel, goggles, and flippers and got in the water. We were instructed to swim slowly across the tank, not to kick our feet, and not to touch any of the creatures in the tank. Not touching a shark seemed like a given to me, but I guess some people need to be warned. I started to swim slowly across the tank and about halfway to the other side I had relaxed enough that I decided to look around a bit. I looked below me – the water was about 15 feet deep – and there were two sharks swimming right up towards me. That's when I realized I had a brass locker key dangling from my wrist, and I remembered reading once that marine biologists think one of the things that attract sharks to people swimming in the ocean is the presence of jewelry or shiny objects. So my idea was to take it off, hand it to the swimmer next to me, and ask *can you hold onto this for a minute?*

The sharks came right up under me, and then leveled off and glided just below me. It's hard to breath a sigh of relief in a snorkel, I'll tell you that. I tried to stay calm and just kept going, but when I got close to the other side there was a shallow area of water, about three feet deep, and there were two sharks right there, where I was supposed to climb out. It was like they were waiting on me. But, obviously I made it. I climbed out and thought, *I can't believe I just did that.* I was so excited about having made it through the shark tank you know what I did? I did it again! I was excited about swimming with those sharks! My family, surprisingly, did not share my excitement.

How can I get over my panic of creatures that want to eat me for dinner but struggle to step across the street and help my neighbor in need? How can I perform an act of courage, such as riding a roller

coaster going over 70 miles an hour and looping over and over, but be afraid to go to someone of whom I need to ask forgiveness. How can I overcome one fear but not my fear of loving and accepting people who are different from me?

Fear is a powerful force in our lives, and it will keep us from doing what God calls us to do and will keep us from being the people God wants us to be. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid! Jonah, unfortunately, was afraid, and he was also unwilling. He was unwilling to answer the call of God on his life. Perhaps it was fear that kept him from answering the call. Whatever the reason, let us not be like Jonah!