



# The New England Church Pulpit

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CALL AND RESPONSE

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Jonah 3.1-5, 10

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three day's walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed her mind about the calamity that she said she would bring upon them; and she did not do it.*

Tao Te Ching

*Success is as dangerous as failure.  
Hope is as hollow as fear.*

*What does it mean that success is as dangerous as failure?  
Whether you go up the ladder or down it, your position is shaky.  
When you stand with your two feet on the ground, you will always keep your balance.  
What does it mean that hope is as hollow as fear?*

*Hope and fear are both phantoms that arise from thinking of the self.  
When we don't see the self as self, what do we have to fear?*

*See the world as your self.  
Have faith in the way things are.  
Love the world as your self;  
then you can care for all things.*

An occupational hazard that comes with being a clergyman is that people are curious about how we made our vocational decision. It comes up from time to time when you get into conversation with people who don't know you, such as on an airplane. I used to lie about it, making some vague comment about being in the social service field, for in the age of televangelists and religious shysters, it was complicated explaining how what I did was quite different from what they did. But then I heard the story about a colleague who, when asked by his airplane seat mate what was his profession, instead of saying "I'm a clergyman," which would shut the conversation down, said "I'm a neurosurgeon." "How interesting," his seatmate responded. "So am I."

My own vocational decision came over a length of time, during my college years. In high school, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said a dentist. But then I soon realized there were two main obstacles to that path: One, I didn't particularly enjoy or do well in chemistry or science. And two, I don't like inflicting pain on other people. So off I went to college to explore other options. My freshman year was spent living with three other guys off campus with a college professor and his wife Janet who rented rooms. One day, out of the blue, Janet said to me: "have you ever considered going into the ministry? I think you have gifts that would serve you well in that regard. Hmmmm. So it made me think. And in the four years of college the call seemed excitingly clearer, so off I went to seminary. It was a process over a period of time, I guess, but as I look back on it now, it was Janet Johnson who called me to consider the possibility. And now, some 45 years later, here I am, still called, still responding.

This parable of Jonah, which comprises a book unto itself in the Hebrew Bible, is a story about a call and a response. You remember the story: God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn the citizens to change their ways or they're in for a lot of trouble. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria; it's in Iraq today. The Assyrians were a powerful empire who more or less ruled the whole area back then. Jews hated Assyrians; Jonah was a Jew. Nineveh is the last place a self-respecting Jew wanted to go. And why was God so interested in Assyria anyway? It didn't set well with this man Jonah. So he boarded the first ship out of town going in the opposite direction, sailing as far away as he could go, to Tarshish, on the southwest coast of Spain.

A nasty and violent storm arose, threatening life and limb of all onboard. Ironically, the crew of the ship on which Jonah is a passenger has a fairly sophisticated theological discussion. These outsiders in this story—Phoenician sailors, people of Nineveh—are all better theologians and morally more reliable than Jonah. When their insight reveals that the storm is the result of Jonah's running away from his God, they quickly decide that the situation is between the two of them—Jonah and his God—so they throw Jonah overboard and the storm subsides.

A big fish—note there's no mention of a whale—swallows Jonah (now you see why I call it a parable?) and after three days in its belly, the big fish spews Jonah out on dry land. God calls a second time and Jonah, being no fool, goes. To make a long story short, Jonah preaches, the people repent, and God spares them. But Jonah is mad as hell at God for doing this. Jonah doesn't like the Ninevites and doesn't think God should either. So Jonah goes off to pout. He and God have a "come to Jesus meeting," as it were, with Jonah none the more assuaged, the story ending with Jonah still angry at God for loving people he—Jonah—hates.

A call and a response. God calls. Jonah responds. Nineveh responds. Whose response will we emulate? The world is still evolving and God calls each of us to participate in that evolution. Some of us are called to serve as clergy. Some of us are called to be teachers. Some of us are called to collect the trash. Some of us are called to be caregivers. Some are called to be physicians and lawyer, mothers or fathers or grandparents; some are called to cook or design or play baseball or hockey. Some are called to march in protest against wrongs perpetrated. Some are called to mete out justice for those who have been wronged by systems and individuals. We are all called, and all gifted, to do something, to be something that the world needs in its ever-changing revolution. It's "our project," as James Forbes calls it.

Note in this story as well that even God changes. God promised destruction on Nineveh because of her wickedness, but the call to Nineveh, through Jonah, to change her ways was taken seriously. And when the citizens of Nineveh's exchanged their evil ways for the good, God changed his plan to destroy them. Call and response. It works both ways between God and people.

The story ends sadly because Jonah can think only about himself. He's embarrassed, he's angry, he's jealous, he's confused that his God would love and forgive the evil people of Nineveh. "I knew this would happen," he remonstrates with God. We are reminded in the Tao Te Ching that this isn't about us; our Judeo-Christian scriptures remind us that it's about God. It's about those in darkness seeing the light. Success and failure are terms we use to track our selfish interests. But who can say what is successful? Sometimes the demarcation of success serves only to flaunt our own achievements. God has a different standard. Who can say what is failure? Some of the best insights we have into life, and into our own being, come from failing. God has a different way of seeing things than we do. For in failing, we often find new life.

We are not called to be successful; we are not worthless when we fail. We are called to be faithful at whatever we do, with the natural gifts given to us, in the context in which we now live. God calls us to give ourselves to the welfare of those in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our community, in our world. What will be our response?

Our choral anthem today invites us to be children of the Light, to follow the example of Jesus who called people to be their best selves. To follow Jesus is to forgive an infinite number of times, to heal those cast out of society, to include those relegated to the margins, to see in every person we meet the image of God in human form.

Call and response. God calls. Nineveh responds...with remorse, and finds new life. God calls. Jonah responds...with anger, with jealousy, and falls into hopelessness. Nineveh calls and God responds...with a life-altering change of heart. "See the world as yourself; have faith in the way things are. Love the world as yourself; then you can care for all things." We are called to "love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves." Amen.

--Gary L. McCann