

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Proper 3B, Sunday, January 25, 2015  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

*Joan of Arcadia* was a TV show that ran from 2003-2005 about a high-school student who was called by God. Joan was just an average teenager when one night she wakes up to someone calling her name: "Joan... Joan!" It's the middle of the night, and she wakes up with a start, and then puts her headphones back on her ears, presumably with music playing, and turns over to go back to sleep. The next morning as she's getting dressed for school, she sees a man out in the backyard, watching her. She is understandably upset, and runs downstairs, calling her police chief father. But it turns out there is no evidence that anyone was there.

Later, on the bus on the way to school, Joan sees a young man watching her. He gets off at the same stop near school and they soon have their first encounter. When this cute-boy tells her that he is actually God, Joan's response is unequivocal: "Don't ever talk to me, again!" When God is waiting to talk with her again after school, Joan's reluctance continues as she begins the conversation saying: "Get lost, I mean it!" and reminds him that her father is the police chief. But God is persistent and as their conversation continues, cute-boy God finally tells Joan that he is "going to be dropping in on her, now and then." Joan is surprised by this, to say the least and sputters... "why?" God responds: "let's just say I need you to do some errands." "Why?" God continues to ignore the 'why's', instead asking Joan to get a job at a local bookstore. The episode, and indeed the entire series, turns on God's call and Joan's response.

The Book of Jonah from which we heard a few verses today, also begins suddenly with a call from God: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah," the story begins, telling him to "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Jonah's response is as unequivocal as Joan's, though with responsive action rather than words. Jonah immediately flees from the presence of the Lord by boarding a ship to sail to Tarshish, in the opposite direction, away from Nineveh. When God first calls Jonah, Jonah's response is to flee.

We only discover Jonah's reasons for responding as such much later in the story. It turns out that Jonah was actually correct in his understanding of God, for his reason for fleeing eventually comes to pass, but we're getting too far ahead... At this point, Jonah's serious miscalculation comes in his understanding of God's seriousness and persistence in calling Jonah to this particular task. A storm blows in, threatening the ship, and Jonah's fellow sailors are at a loss about what to do. They question Jonah and end up crying out - calling - to the Lord to spare them and to spare Jonah, as they throw him into the stormy sea. God responds by sending a large fish to save Jonah. The sailor's call; the Lord responds...

Inside a big fish, Jonah then calls out to God in the hope of a less smelly salvation, confident that the Lord will hear his voice and respond. Indeed he is correct, for the fish spews Jonah out onto the beach. Jonah calls for deliverance and God responds...

But God isn't done with Jonah yet. As we hear today: "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.’” God’s call and God’s message hasn’t changed, and Jonah gets another chance, a second chance, to change his response. It seems Jonah has learned the lesson because this time, Jonah does as God commands. It’s hidden in English but the key Hebrew verbs, used in both chapter 1 and 3, to describe God’s command to Jonah are: arise, go, call. This second time around, Jonah immediately does the first 2: Jonah gets up - arises - and goes to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. The narrator makes sure to let us know that this time things are different... Jonah responds to God’s call by exactly repeating the first 2 actions: arise, go.

We have to wait for a verse to find out if Jonah actually fulfills the third and last part - the call. The narrator leaves us in suspense for a moment, describing the “great” city of Nineveh, before telling us that Jonah indeed fulfills God’s call completely, by calling to all in the city: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” It is one of the shortest and most generalized prophetic calls in all of scripture. Jonah doesn’t offer any reasons as to why the Ninevites will be overthrown. It is also odd that Jonah doesn’t preface his message with any divine mandate. There is no “Thus sayeth the Lord,” or “an oracle of the Lord.” Jonah doesn’t even repeat the first, the original difficult message that “their wickedness has come up before me.” It sounds like Jonah has made up his own words of judgement and so... is Jonah responding faithfully to God’s call? And if so, what will happen next? Jonah called... how will the Ninevites respond?

We don’t have to wait long to find out, for the response comes in the very next verse: “The people of Nineveh believed God; they called a fast and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.” Jonah called and the people respond immediately with their own call... a call to repentance for everyone in the city. Jonah’s prophetic word comes to pass as the city is indeed ‘overthrown’, just not in the way Jonah had intended. The city is overthrown, is turned, by the repentance of the people. When news of it all reaches the king, in the verses we didn’t hear, he deepens the call to repentance in the hope, only the hope and the possibility, that “God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” The people and the king call for action... and the Lord responds by changing “his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” Call and response. A call to repentance; a response of mercy and forgiveness.

Our passage ended there today but it is not the end of the story. In this second half, the second chance at getting the response to God’s call right, the story ended up being more about the Ninevites and God than Jonah. But Jonah is not gone, for Jonah responds to the recent developments... Jonah had been right all along, it turns out, and responds with anger to God’s merciful response to the Ninevites repentant response: “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing...” Jonah’s first choice to flee from God’s presence was because of his correct understanding of God as gracious and merciful and loving. Jonah isn’t mad, as some prophets are, because of undeserved suffering; Jonah is mad because of undeserved forgiveness. The Ninevites were Gentiles... not part of the family... who may have even caused suffering for God’s people Israel... and Jonah ran away from God’s presence because he did not want to risk that God would forgive. Jonah knew that the interplay of call and response might be

unpredictable, uncontrollable... and so Jonah's first impulse was to flee.

God's call to Joan in the pilot episode of *Joan of Arcadia* was only the beginning. Without any sense of why she should bother, Joan does indeed go get the bookstore job, as cute-boy God asked her. Her big brother had been withering away in depression following a tragic accident and the resulting life-long injuries, but he notices Joan's initiative and the episode ends with him waking her up to thank you, saying: "I appreciate what you did... and I get your point... My little sister can get a job, I got no excuse... so you're shaming me back into the world... But you're right, it's time. Go back to sleep." All of a sudden, after the fact, Joan sees a larger purpose, and an unexpected response, to God's simple command to get a job at the bookstore. And so she is off on her journey as part of God's mission in Arcadia. As the series continues, it comes to be described as "ripples"... how our actions - how our responses to the calls of God in our life - ripple outward.

The power of the interplay between call and response can never fully known and it can rarely be predicted ahead of time. If Jonah had simply followed God's call the first time, perhaps the sailors never would have come to hear about or believe in the Lord or to call out in prayer. Who knows what good ripples could come from that experience? If God hadn't given Jonah a second chance, perhaps the fate of the the people of Nineveh would have been different. The story of Jonah shows us all manner of possibilities as the Lord interacts with all manner of people... as we call to God and as God calls to us... as we respond to one another and to God, we create the dance of life together.

What part in that dance are you playing today? What call do you hear and what will your response be? What call are you being asked to issue to others and what call do you need to cry to God? Whatever it is, may you feel the ripples of God's love washing over you through it and may the ripples you send forth from your life be a force of grace in the world.

Our call as children of God begins here [at the font]... And so let us stand together and respond to God's grace of forgiveness and belonging by responding with our commitment as part of God's family.