

JANUARY 18, 2015: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
I Samuel 3b-10, 19 I Corinthians 13c-15a, 17-20 John 1:35-42

Those who have seen the classic movie *Simon Birch* remember how the title character is convinced that one day God's going to use him to accomplish something great. "He's going to make me a hero," he tells his best friend. And in the end, in spite of almost everyone ridiculing his belief that he's being called, he does something very heroic.

The original readers of our Sacred Scriptures could identify with the young boy's conviction of having a calling from God. Like Simon, they believed God had set them aside for greatness. Their heroic feat probably wouldn't even make that evening's local TV news, but it would be something which, without God's help, they couldn't have pulled off. They listened for that call throughout their lives, always ready to jump into action at a moment's notice.

Of course, once Jesus' second century CE followers started to adopt a hierarchical structure in their communities, their expectation of receiving a divine call began to fritter away. More and more, people became convinced that only priests and bishops actually received such calls. They even began to eisegete the gospel calls to discipleship – like the one in today's gospel pericope – interpreting them as calls to the hierarchy. They were convinced Jesus wasn't calling his first followers simply to be other Christs – imitators of himself - he was calling them to the newly-developed clerical state of life.

The biggest pitfall of this misinterpretation was that many people eventually stopped hearing the calls which God and the risen Jesus were constantly giving them. They reasoned: "Such calls are for special people, not me." Yet God and the risen Jesus didn't stop calling just because people stopped listening. Knowing this is the first step in returning to the biblical experience of calls.

As we hear in today's I Samuel reading, the young Samuel had yet to discover that Yahweh actually calls people. After his "Abbott and Costello Are You Calling Me?" routine with Eli the priest, the boy eventually takes his mentor's advice and answers Yahweh's next call with a simple, "Speak, for your servant is listening." God expects God's people to be listeners. We can't get off the hook by pretending God's speaking to someone else, or not even calling at all.

Paul meets our feelings of unworthiness head on. "Do you not know," he asks the Corinthian community, "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" If God's Spirit is in us, then God can certainly be expected to communicate with us. But we must stop focusing on ourselves. God's call always revolves around relating to others in a new way; it always forces us to go out of ourselves and concentrate on those around us. That's where today's gospel pericope kicks in. Its key line is Jesus' question to the two disciples of John the Baptizer who were following him: "What are you looking for?"

Well-known spiritual author Jack Shea often reduces the historical Jesus to the bare essentials. "Jesus of Nazareth," he states, "was concerned with answering just three questions: what do you want out of life, where do you get it, how much does it cost?"

Our sacred authors agree. Unless we have some idea about what we want out of life – know what we're looking for – God's voice will never be able to break through the other voices which drown it out.

If our life's purpose is just to tread water; to leave this earth exactly as we found it on the day we were born, then it might be best we don't hear God's call. It would just aggravate us.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations. F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

JANUARY 25, 2014: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 I Corinthians 7:29-31 Mark 1:14-20

Biblical calls always revolve around following a person, not dogmas or rules and regulations, not even a set plan of action. That creates problems for a lot of people.

It certainly creates a huge problem for Jonah.

Many commentators completely overlook the message Yahweh gives Jonah to proclaim to the Ninevites in today's first reading. They refer to it as an oracle of "repentance." Listen carefully to the prophet's words: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!" It's a prophecy of doom, not repentance. Yahweh's not calling on these Assyrians to repent; he's simply warning them not to buy any long term life insurance. In a little over a month they're going to be wiped out.

But then, to everyone's surprise – especially Jonah's – the unpredictable happens: the whole city, from the king to the animals, repents. Then something even more unpredictable happens: Yahweh repents! "When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them: he did not carry it out."

Nothing can be more disturbing to a prophet than discovering that, after he or she has delivered God's word, God decides to change that word. Jonah is ticked; reminding Yahweh that he ran away to Tarshish in the first place because he couldn't depend on Yahweh following through on any prophecy he gave him to deliver.

Jonah – and the people for whom this book was originally written – have an image of God in the back of their minds, an image which they expect God to live up to. The author of Jonah wants us to examine our consciences. When we claim to be followers of God, are we following a picture of God we've conjured up in our minds, or the actual person?

It's clear from today's Marcan pericope that we Christians are also expected to follow a real person: the risen Jesus. Jesus' invitation to his first four gospel followers is quite simple. "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people." There are no limits to the call, no specifics, except for making people more important than the four's present occupation. They're to begin their discipleship by adopting the value system of the one who calls them. People are now to be at the center of their lives. They, like anyone called to be another Christ, respond totally and immediately, even putting their family ties on a back burner.

As Paul realizes, more than ten years before the first gospel is written, those who follow Jesus live lives frequently at odds to others around them. "Let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing . . . For the world in its present form is passing away." Everything changes when we change the way we relate to others. It's the only way to create a new world.

Going back to our Jonah passage, how does one explain Yahweh changing Yahweh's mind. The world's expert on the book of Jonah, Hans Walter Wolff, had a simple, but powerful explanation. "Yahweh doesn't have to be faithful to Yahweh's word" the late Scripture scholar taught, "as long as Yahweh is faithful to Yahweh's people."

Real people are always subject to change, especially when people around them change. Who among us hasn't changed our word about something when circumstances or people changed in ways which made our word counterproductive, when our word actually caused an effect at odds with that which we originally intended?

No wonder we're tempted to create an unchangeable image of the God we follow. If God doesn't change then neither do we have to change.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations. F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222