

JANUARY 17TH, 2021: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[I Samuel 3b-10, 19; I Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20; John 1:35-42](#)

Nothing creates more interest for Scripture's original readers than the "call narratives" many of our sacred authors include in their writings. When Yahweh or the gospel Jesus asks someone to be a disciple, everyone listens carefully to the details. Their interest isn't hard to understand. Those original readers feel called in a similar way. Though times and circumstances differ, several elements are always the same.

First, the divine caller usually demands the person who is called "move." Neither Jesus nor Yahweh says, "Stay there! Don't move a muscle! Just keep doing what you're doing!" Movement is always entailed, either physical or psychological or both. No one responds to such a call without experiencing change.

Second, the individual who's called is expected to follow not some intellectual ideals or principles, but a real person. When we deal with any person, there's always something new to learn about him or her. Nothing stays the same. Those not open to the person aren't open to the call.

Third, whoever is called is now expected to put his or her security in the person doing the calling. Whatever or whoever they consistently fell back on before they now push into the background. They trust only Yahweh or Jesus. Their personal strength shifts from former places, people and ideas to someone completely "other."

Samuel discovers in today's first reading, when God calls there's no hesitation, no thinking it over. Eli correctly instructs the boy, ". . . If you are called, reply, 'Speak, Yahweh, for your servant is listening.'" In a very deep sense, if he's not already listening for a call, he'll probably pull a "Sgt. Schultz" and hear nothing even though the call is coming loud and clear. Eli and Samuel's misunderstanding tells us we can easily mistake the actual caller for someone else. We'd better know whom and what to listen for, else we'll think it's just a figment of our imagination; something we can slough off at will.

The call might even come through someone with whom we're already familiar but are now looking at from a different perspective. That seems to be what happens in today's gospel pericope. Along with Andrew and Simon, Jesus already appears to be one of the Baptizer's followers when John points to him and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

Now because of John's leadership and authority, whatever this Galilean carpenter says and does takes on a deeper meaning. When he, for instance, asks, "What are you looking for?" he's referring not just to an immediate need; in this context, he's asking the pair, "What do you want out of life?"

The two eventually discover Jesus' "Come" is an invitation to become a new person. He calls them to go beyond their here and now and uncover a part of themselves they've never before noticed. That's why he quickly changes Simon's name to "Rock." Those who respond to God's call not only uncover more and more about God, they also uncover more and more about themselves.

That's exactly what happened when Paul responded to the risen Jesus' call on the Damascus Road. He not only discovered the Christ was present in those he was persecuting, he also discovered he/she was also present in him. No longer did he, as a good Jew, have to regularly visit the Jerusalem temple. Once he answers Christ's call and moves to a new frame of mind, he discovers his own body ". . . is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . ." What he thought outside himself is actually inside himself.

Hard to convince someone of such a wonder who's never said "Yes!" to the risen Jesus. But, on the other hand . . .

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JANUARY 24TH, 2021: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20](#)

We spend so much time arguing about whether a person can live in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights that we actually forget why the author of Jonah originally wrote his well-known book. Scholars for a long time have concluded these small three chapters aren't to be taken literally. People read and saved them not because of their biological marvels, but because of their theological message. I often tell my students since the demise of Monty Python the only group who can do justice to Jonah is the Saturday Night Live crew. Yet even though the writer chose to convey his theology through classic sarcasm, his message is one of the most biting in all of Scripture.

It, like today's other two readings, revolves around conversion. How does one get from point A to point B, not geographically but psychologically? Our sacred authors presume only those who continually move from one point to another have true biblical faith. The rest are just treading water.

Biblical faith is constantly moving; it never stops growing and evolving. Unlike the catechism faith many of us grew up with, it isn't a static experience; a specific amount of dogmas and teachings we're to memorize and eventually "believe in." The only movement I can remember back then consisted in each catechism we studied containing more pages than the prior one. My faith grew because my catechism grew. Yet no matter how much I studied, it didn't lead to conversion. Though I knew more, I still stayed in the same basic place.

In many ways we're looking in a mirror when we hear about Jonah. Everyone in the book goes through a change – the sailors, Ninevites, animals, even Yahweh – except Jonah. He insists on maintaining the same frame of mind until the non-bitter end. Jonah's author directs his book to the "unchangeable believers" among us.

It's important to note that Yahweh doesn't send the prophet to these notorious Ninevite sinners with a message of repentance. On the contrary, it's a message of doom: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!" But after Jonah proclaims it, the unexpected happens. Not only do they repent, their sudden turnabout forces Yahweh to repent.

Of course Yahweh's behavior creates huge problems for us "Greek-thinking" people. How can God go back on God's word and still be God? The great Hans Walter Wolff once answered that question with one of the deepest biblical insights I've ever encountered: "God doesn't have to be faithful to God's word," the famous Scripture scholar said, "as long as God's faithful to God's people." In other words, when God's people repent, God repents.

The gospel Jesus learned that lesson well. He makes constant conversion a condition for carrying on his ministry. This itinerant preacher's basic "stump speech" is simple: To experience the "kingdom of God" – God working effectively in one's life – one must "repent," pull off a 180-degree switch in her or his value system. What once was on the outskirts of one's dos and don'ts is now front and center, and vice versa. He's a demanding leader. Those who can't (or won't) change day by day can't experience God day by day.

That change is certainly behind Jesus' promise to his first four followers, "I will make you fishers of people." He's giving them a brand new focus in their lives, opening a door they never knew existed.

Probably few of us will experience the five-fold turnabout Paul speaks of in today's I Corinthians passage. To say the least, that's a little drastic. But the possibility is there for everyone. Who knows what will happen when we agree to convert?

There's no "off button" on that machine.

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JANUARY 31ST, 2021: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20; I Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28](#)

The first miracle Jesus works in each gospel is very significant. The evangelist deliberately chooses it not only to set the tone for his whole gospel, but to especially tell us what we, as other Christs, should be doing to imitate the person whose ministry we're carrying on. That's certainly the case with today's Marcan pericope.

There's more to Jesus exorcising a demoniac than might appear at first glance. Jesus' earthly contemporaries thought demons were the source of more than just moral evils. Besides sins, they caused all sorts of sicknesses and other physical and psychological evils. If it's bad, a demon must somehow be behind it.

No telling exactly what kind of demon possessed the man in the Capernaum synagogue on that fateful Saturday. But it was sharp enough to realize that Jesus of Nazareth was intent on "destroying us" one demon at a time. In other words, Mark's Jesus conceived of his ministry as a force to eradicate evil.

That means we who follow him and are committed to carrying on his work are expected to buy into his dream. Before anything else, we, like him, should be destroyers of evil, no matter how or where we encounter it. We need only read the rest of Mark's gospel to see how he accomplishes this step by step, until at the end he completely gives himself and eventually comes back as a totally new creation.

The problem in getting rid of evil is two-fold. How do we know what evil to attack, and how do we eradicate it? Today's first reading supplies us with the first answer: prophets.

Our biblical authors presume a person of faith can't get by without prophets in his or her life. They're the community's conscience. That's why Yahweh's people panic when Moses – the prophet par excellence – is about to die. How will they continue to know what Yahweh wants them to do?

Though some interpret Yahweh's promise to raise up another "prophet like (Moses) from among their kin" as applying to just one special, specific prophet, the original readers of Deuteronomy seem to have interpreted the promise as Yahweh's guarantee that there will always be other prophets in their lives. God won't let them fly blind.

Not being biblically oriented, many of us believe Jesus simply set up an institution – the Roman Catholic Church – which tells us through its infallible decrees what God wants of us, pointing out which evils to exterminate. Certainly we should expect the church to be prophetic, but what happens when the evil we encounter actually comes from the church? The late Carroll Stuhlmueller often mentioned that throughout history the community's prophets have rarely been members of the hierarchical structure. It's possible a pope or bishop could be a prophet – e.g. Pope Francis – but prophecy usually isn't one of their gifts. Carroll was convinced the prophets God sends are almost always "outsiders." That's why it's essential to know the classic five (or six) rules for separating real prophets from fake prophets. (Another day, another commentary.)

Though the institution rarely is prophetic, it does have a role. After prophets surface the evils to be destroyed, institutional administrators should point out the practical ways to eradicate them. Carroll was convinced prophets make lousy administrators. When put in administrative positions, prophets will quickly frustrate everyone around them. That's not their gift.

Paul, for instance, in today's second reading, prophetically points out that the risen Jesus wants us free from anxieties. Most Christians today, though, wouldn't agree with his "celibacy conclusion" as a way to accomplish such tranquility. It might have made sense when the Parousia was thought to be just around the corner, but 2,000 years later

We need both prophets and administrators.

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 2ND, 2021: PRESENTATION OF JESUS

[Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40](#)

In preparing for today's liturgy, it would be very helpful to glance through the section on Jesus' Presentation in Raymond Brown's classic book, *The Birth of the Messiah*. One will quickly notice the late Scripture scholar spends a lot of time separating the theology Luke is actually trying to convey by narrating the event from the many pious, but often false ways people have treated that incident through the centuries.

Like all serious students of Scripture, Brown first demonstrates how Luke has combined two different Jewish practices into one happening. First, Torah regulations demanded every first born male be offered to Yahweh, then bought back. Second, after each birth, Jewish women were expected to go through a period purification before they could once again return to the formal practice of their faith. Though almost always fulfilled separately, the evangelist has Joseph and Mary carry out both these obligations in one action.

From today's Hebrews passage it's clear that the unknown author of the letter would look at Jesus' presentation and Mary's purification as a sign Jesus actually identified with those he was sent to save from death. "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way, that he might. . . expiate the sins of the people." In the writer's theology, if Jesus wasn't human, he couldn't save humans. And nothing is more human than having to observe human laws.

It's significant that Luke mentions nothing about Joseph redeeming Jesus with the usual five shekel offering. The omission seems to be a way of saying this is one case in which the child remains Yahweh's property, a point Luke will develop throughout his gospel.

I remember as a child often looking at the Immaculate Heart of Mary picture my grandma had hanging in her bedroom. The sword through Mary's heart especially attracted my attention. Much later I learned this particular image originated in Simeon's words to her during her purification ritual. "Behold, this child destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted - and you yourself a sword will pierce - so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Basing their insights on this heart-piercing sword, many old-time commentators and homilists developed the idea that Mary, like her son, was destined to suffer for the salvation of the world. Yet, as Brown insists, it doesn't seem to be the image Luke is trying to convey to his readers.

Luke seems more interested in employing the sword as a symbol of judgment than as a metaphor for pain or suffering. The evangelist is convinced Jesus' teachings and life-style will force people to make decisions. Do we follow him or reject him? Do we imitate his dying and rising or look elsewhere for fulfillment in our lives? Luke presumes this sword of discernment cuts through everyone's heart, and he wants to make certain readers are on the right side of the cut.

The concept of having to choose God's way or the highway is a frequent biblical concept. For instance, today's first reading the prophet Malachi presumes his unknown messenger of Yahweh is an agent of judgment. "He is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and will purify the sons of Levi." The true faith is expected to rise to the surface.

In Luke's case, Jesus will demand that Israelites choose between his reform and their "old time religion," just as Mary will have to one day decide between remaining just a physical family relative of Jesus, or joining new family of faith.

Such sword heart-piercing is an essential part of being other Christs. And Jesus is the swordsman.

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FEBRUARY 7TH, 2021: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[Job 7:1-4, 6-7; I Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39](#)

Biblical fundamentalists have a huge problem when they hear one biblical author disagree with another biblical author. Among other places, that happens both in the bible's "wisdom debate," and in today's three liturgical readings.

The sacred writers who composed our "wisdom literature" – e.g. Proverbs, Sirach, Song of Songs, Job, Wisdom, etc. – clash theologically on the most basic question of wisdom: can we surface patterns of God's behavior or not? The author of Proverbs says, "Yes." We need simply look around us and we'll see God's patterns in ourselves and nature. On the other hand, the author of Job says, "No." No matter how carefully we look, we can never find God working logically in our lives.

Today's passage from Job shows at least one result for searching for a God we'll never understand. There's no method to God's actions, nor a pattern to how God treats us. That means for many, life ends up being a "drudgery." "My days," Job reflects, "are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; they come to an end without hope." There's no doubt on which side of the cup "half/full, half/empty" dilemma Job comes down upon.

Yet at least on this point, our Christian sacred authors take their focus from God's actions and zero in on ours. Today's passages from Paul and Mark, for instance, tell us striving to be other Christs that we should never just sit back and grade God working in our lives. What are we doing in the meantime?

In both their theologies, the secret to having interesting, exciting lives is to practice "*hesed*."

Hesed is a Hebrew biblical term for going beyond what's expected of us. No one can fault us for doing only what's necessary. *Hesed*, on the other hand, is a surprise; a total free action.

Paul, in our I Corinthians pericope, tells us he has "an obligation to preach the gospel." He has no other choice. It's how he preaches the good news that provides him with a "recompense" – in two ways. First, though he can expect at least room and board from those he evangelizes, he goes beyond their expectations, "offering the gospel free of charge," an obvious act of *hesed*.

Second, nowhere does the risen Jesus insist Paul actually identify with those to whom he proclaims the gospel. Yet beyond everyone's expectations, the Apostle makes himself "a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all . . ." Unlike many of us priests and ministers, he becomes one with those to whom he ministers. He's not just a preacher standing apart from his "audience." Jesus amazes his disciples in today's gospel passage. After his first day of ministry, they presume he's returning to Capernaum and picking up where he left off the night before. In less than 24 hours, he's become a local hero. Being members of his inner circle, they've already lined up TV and radio interviews and even contacted the local papers.

But he says, "Pack up! We're leaving town!" He's planning to travel to other villages and other synagogues, preaching the word to people who probably won't be as open to the good news as those in Capernaum. As long as he stays put, he's playing it safe.

No doubt on Good Friday evening those who were anxious to get him to return to town that morning muttered something to the effect, "He went one synagogue too far."

Had Jesus gone no further than Capernaum, he eventually would have died peacefully in bed, his family and friends around him, but we would never have heard of him, or *hesed*.

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