1-27/28-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Jonah 3:1-5, Mark 6:7-13 Sent

In the spring of 1999, while I was serving as Associate Pastor at Worthington UMC near Columbus, I received a call from the District Superintendent that I would be sent that summer

to serve at St Paul UMC in Payne, Ohio.

My first thought was, where in the state is Payne?

My second thought was, and how do you spell it?

Keep in mind this is before cell phones and before google maps. I literally had to pull out my paper map from the car, and even then it took a while to find Payne on a map. Once I figured out it was spelled P-A-Y-N-E the town was also easier to find.

Payne is often confused with Painesville, yet they are on opposite sides of Ohio. And much different in size. Painesville is near Cleveland with almost 20,000 residents. Payne is four miles from the Indiana border, in Paulding County, with a little over 1,000 residents. The largest city near Payne is Ft Wayne, IN.

When the call came sending me to Payne, I was not yet engaged to Ken, and had nothing to tether me to the Columbus region. So I dutifully went where I was sent. Then. Now. And every move in-between.

Many of you have been sent to new locations due to the military, job locations, or family connections. Have you ever considered how you are also sent into this world to be God’s messengers of love and grace, hope and peace? Have you ever realized that all who claim the name of Christ are sent into this world to do the work of God?

As I have said previously this month, we are all loved and claimed and known by God. And last week I reminded us that we are also all called by God to follow Jesus. Yet following Jesus is more than simply receiving Jesus into our hearts and lives. Following Jesus is more than a simple verbal affirmation of faith. Once we say yes to Jesus’ love for us, then we are sent forth to live for Jesus, in the midst of our daily lives—sharing the love we’ve experienced with others, offering forgiveness to those who cannot forgive themselves, living in ways that remind those around us that they, too, are beloved children of God, inviting others to follow Jesus.

When we are called by God, we are also sent by God. And I do not believe that we are sent out in random ways to random places to live for God in this world. Rather, I believe we are sent out in specific ways by God, to the people, the contexts and the struggles that use our passions, our skills, and our experiences, even those skills we did not realize we had or those experiences we dismissed.

In Deshler a laywoman who suffered the loss of three babies through stillborn and full term deaths created Sufficient Grace Ministries for Women, a ministry to offer comfort and grief care to women and families who have lost a baby through miscarriage, stillborn or infant death. God has called and sent Kelly to train others in perinatal hospice and bereavement services, to offer tangible support through memory books and comfort bears, and to share the love of Christ in those vulnerable moments.

When I served at Payne, two women were called by God to birth a food pantry during my first maternity leave. They cared enough for the community that they wanted to move sporadic assistance to monthly assistance, a vital need for that small town. Neither woman was shy,

and that aided them in never being afraid to ask for help—whether that be for volunteers from the congregations in town, or for deals from Walmart or the local grocery. One of the women had never used a coupon in her life yet became the queen of coupons and price comparisons.

I believe God sent them to that ministry to remind them of needs greater than their own, while using their compassion and willingness to learn along the way.

David Finney, in our congregation, has never met a stranger. I believe he could talk with anyone anytime. God used this gift and his passion for Jesus when God sent him to lead an accountability group for the guys at Hope House. David admits that at first he was intimidated, and wondered what he could share with guys that come from such a different walk of life than his experience. Yet he has learned along the way to start with a humble heart and recognize how we are all sinners saved by grace who struggle with life and faith, albeit in different ways.

When God calls, God also sends. And when God sends, God also empowers. We’ll spend more time on empowerment two weeks from now.

Yet if we are honest this morning, how many times does God call and we are reluctant to go where God leads, hesitant to do what God calls, even averse to serve where God sends us?

As an ordained United Methodist elder, I am supposed to be fully itinerant, willing to be sent wherever and whenever the Bishop calls. Yet I have colleagues who have been sent where they did not want to go. One wanted to move to Columbus and was sent to Van Wert instead. Another wanted to stay in Northwest Ohio and was sent near Athens. I have had colleagues who have been sent where they did not expect to go. Sometimes those unexpected moves led to their most fruitful ministries. They arrived with little to no expectations, and watched the Spirit move in mighty ways. And yes, I have had colleagues who have flat out said no to a move.

Sometimes it was not the best situation for their family. Sometimes they just didn’t want to go

where God and the Cabinet were sending them.

Think of the times in your own faith lives when God told you to go, and you dragged your feet

or argued with God or were intimidated to be sent to “those” people or “that” area of ministry.

God says go invite your neighbor to worship. You argue you don’t even know your neighbor’s name. God says sign up for a night of games with Interfaith Hospitality Network kids. You grumble that you aren’t good with kids except your own grandkids. God says offer to pray with a colleague. You confess your fear of praying in public, when all God is asking for is sincere words from your heart. God says be in ministry here, you insist on running the other direction.

God says share your talents in ministry in this way, you insist that you are too busy.

Can you imagine all of the excuses God has heard from God’s people as to why we can’t or shouldn’t or don’t want to go where God sends us? We’re too busy. We don’t have the money. We’re not trained. It’s bad timing. It’s too risky. They’re not like us. We’re not like them. We’re too old. We’re too young. Sometimes we even deny that we ever hear a call from God.

If you have ever given an excuse to God, know that you are not alone. When you are hesitant to go where God sends you, remember the story of Jonah. Jonah is more than a fish story. Jonah is really a story of faith.

Jonah was a prophet of God who shared God’s word with the people of Israel. Yet one day God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and call them to task for their evil ways. Nineveh was the last place Jonah wanted to God to send him, or anyone else for that matter. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the hated enemies of Israel. Assyria was well known for its wicked ways and brutality. Assyria was the country that wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They were wicked, they were cruel, they were heathens. Why would God want Jonah to prophesy to them?

Jonah wanted nothing to do with Nineveh, so he sought to flee from the Lord. He went to the dock and took the first ship heading in the opposite direction, which happened to be going to Tarshish. Yet God knew where Jonah had fled, and caused a great storm to come up at sea. The sailors prayed each of their own god, begging for their lives, and even threw their precious cargo overboard. When they cast lots and realized that Jonah was the reason for the storm,

they threw Jonah into the sea. And instantly the storm ceased.

Jonah was not overcome by wind and waves. Rather, he was swallowed by a large fish. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, often referred to in children’s stories as a whale. Finally, Jonah prayed to God and God had the fish spew Jonah back onto dry land.

Now comes today’s passage. God called to Jonah a second time, sending him to Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeyed. Jonah walked the streets of this foreign city, as a foreign prophet, yet God opened the ears of the Assyrian people. Jonah proclaimed, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people believed him. They knew there was no way to prepare for an invasion in less than forty days. They knew the only help they could get was divine help. So they believed God, and lamented, everyone from the king to the animals.

God heard their cries of lament, and did not bring calamity down upon this sworn enemy of Israel.

Jonah was upset. He didn’t want God to be God. He didn’t want to see success in this location

where he never planned to go, yet was sent anyway by God.

Where are our Ninevehs? Where are those places we never would want to go as God’s people in this world? Who are those people we never would want God to offer love and mercy?

God often calls us to places and people and ministries beyond our comfort zone. For they, too, are beloved children of God. And God knows we have gifts and skills and experiences to share with one another. In my experience wherever I am sent, I also receive. Sometimes I learn as much or more about God and myself than I give to others.

God is persistent in calling us and sending us, not only to places that are familiar but also to our Ninevehs, those places we would rather not go.

Whenever we finally say yes to God, whenever we are willing to go where God sends us, to whomever and wherever God sends us, in order to go we have to trust God.

Jonah had to trust God to be God. Jonah was following God’s call to preach to Israel’s sworn enemies. It was the last place Jonah wanted or expected to be. Yet it was where God sent Jonah, not once but twice, so even reluctantly Jonah trusted God to be God.

Sometimes God acts according to God’s character in ways that we don’t want act. Sometimes in life God forgives and loves those we don’t want to forgive, let alone love. For Jonah, trusting God meant trusting the One who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing."

God doesn’t always act in the way we want God to act. Jonah didn’t want Nineveh to be spared.

Yet God spared the city when they repented and turned to God.

Jonah had to trust God to be God.

The first disciples of Jesus had to trust God to provide. After Jesus began his ministry in the region of the Galilee, teaching and healing and casting out demons, he and his disciples returned to his home town of Nazareth. Yet when he began to teach in his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus was rejected and subsequently could perform no miracles there. His hometown still viewed him as the carpenter’s kid, Mary’s son with questionable lineage, rejecting who he had become by pigeonholing him into who they thought he was.

The disciples were probably as amazed by Jesus’ failure in his hometown as they were by his miracles elsewhere. Yet in response, Jesus didn’t cast a curse on his hometown, or withdraw to nurse his wounds. Instead, he turned around and sent his disciples 2x2 into neighboring towns and villages, multiplying his work in this world.

Jesus was very specific when sending out his disciples on what they would take and not take;

what they would do and not do. They would take a staff and wear sandals. They would not take bread or money or wear two tunics. They would stay in one place if they were welcomed, sharing Jesus’ call to repentance, casting out demons and anointing the sick with oil. If they were not welcome, they would leave shaking the dust off their feet, taking nothing of that place with them.

Thus the disciples went from town to town, 2x2, without Jesus present with them, yet carrying forth Jesus’ message, and trusting God to provide. By not taking anything with them, their trust was part of their message.

When we are sent to do God’s work in this world, we have to trust God.

We have to trust God’s promise that we are not alone. For the Holy Spirit is God working in and through and among us in this world. The Holy Spirit will encourage us and empower us,

challenge us and nurture us. We must remember that whenever and wherever we are sent,

we are not alone. God is with us.

We have to trust God’s message, a message of love and grace, a message of salvation and new life, a message of hope and meaning. We are all God’s beloved children. Jesus has come to save us all. Not some, not a few, but all who will confess and believe. If we do not believe this message we are called to proclaim, we cannot then share it authentically with others. The world around us yearns to see us live what we believe, to be authentic witnesses in word and action, in call and care.

We have to trust God’s direction, especially when God sends us down new paths for new ministries with new people. The phrases “We’ve always done it that way” and “we’ve never done that before” ought to be stricken from our vocabulary, for they are like road blocks to God’s vision and direction. This does not mean we throw out everything old to make way for the new. What this means is we are prayerfully open to whatever direction God may take us,

revamping what works to make it stronger and trying new ways of ministry to reach out with God’s message and grace.

Finally, in order to be sent to do God’s work in this world, we need to trust God’s call. This call may come to us as a congregation. This call may come to us as individuals. This call may send us deeper into mission and ministry together as a congregation. This call may invite us to step out in faith at work or at school, at home or in our free time.

Years ago, during seminary, my friends and I would often worship at a local United Methodist church that had a banner hanging at the front of the church which proclaimed, “The sign of God is that you will be led where you did not plan to go.”

From Abraham to Jonah, from Mary to Paul, from our faith ancestors here in Springboro to a congregation in Illinois to the congregation that surrounds us today, we are all called and we are all sent, as followers of Jesus, to go where God leads, to serve where God sends us, to love whom God loves, to be God’s messenger of salvation and hope and peace.

May we recognize that we are all messengers, all missionaries, all prophets, all followers of Jesus sent to believe and live and share the good news of Jesus. Our sins have been forgiven.

We have been offered new life in this world and eternal life through faith in Jesus.

Wherever we are sent, may we go forth in faith, in trust, in obedience, in thankfulness.

Come, Holy Spirit, and lead us wherever God will have us go.

May it be so.

Let us pray.