

“Reluctant Heroes”

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10 + Mark 1:14-20 = prophet and disciple

We hear of reluctant heroes, folk who overcome their paralyzing fears and are then able to accomplish great things beyond imagination.

However, Jonah had even more reluctance and regrets than most as seen in the prequel to our



texts today. How Jonah fled from God’s call. How a great fish had swallowed him until he repented, following God’s call to prophesy to Ninevah.

On arriving in Ninevah, the greatest city of the day, how he preached with no enthusiasm the shortest and worst sermon in history, almost whispered so no one would hear:

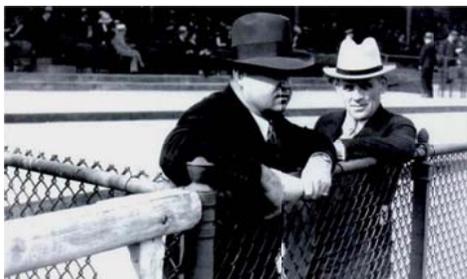
“Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown.”

Despite his best efforts to sabotage God’s word, despite his underwhelming effort at prophesying, Jonah fails to obscure the power of God’s word. The people of Ninevah repented and turned to God. God redeemed the people of Ninevah, and stopped the planned destruction.



Although he lacks enthusiasm, Jonah finally obeys ~ reluctantly, fearfully ~ but nevertheless God’s purpose is fulfilled. Jonah is the prophet for the rest of us, filled with foot-dragging and regrets ~ a real prophet, a realistic prophet.

In the roaring Twenties, the notorious gangster Al Capone had a lawyer named Easy Eddie. Eddie was an excellent lawyer. His skill at the law kept Big Al Capone out of jail for a very long time.



To show his appreciation, Capone rewarded him with the highlife. Eddie's family occupied a large, fenced estate filling a whole city block. They had many servants, every convenience and round-the-clock armed protection. Easy Eddie gave little consideration to the atrocities he was defending in court.



However, Eddie had one soft spot in his callous heart: his son. Eddie saw to it that his young son had the best of everything, withholding nothing. He taught him how to shoot. He taught him how to fly. Despite his involvement with the mob, Eddie even tried to teach him right from wrong. Eddie wanted his son to rise above Eddie's sordid life and be a better man.

Even with all the material benefits from his mob ties, Eddie knew he could not give his son the two most important things in life: a good example and a good name. More than anything, he wanted these for his son.

A Catholic, Eddie struggled mightily with his conscience. To expunge his notoriety, he would have to trade away all the wealth and everything that goes with it. He had to make right all the wrong he has done, go to the authorities, and tell the truth about Scarface Al Capone. He would need to testify against the mob in order to redeem his name and offer his son some semblance of integrity.

Testify he did. His evidence led to Al Capone's conviction. Years later within days of Capone's release from prison, Eddie was assassinated in a blaze of gunfire. He had given his son the greatest gift he could ever offer at the greatest price he could ever pay.



The sequel to that story is, like Ninevah, the son took his father's example and name to heart. Butch O'Hare became a naval aviator.

O'Hare was the Navy's first WWII flying ace when he attacked a formation of nine heavy bombers assaulting his aircraft carrier. With limited ammunition, he managed to single-handedly

engage the escort fighters and damage or destroy several of the bombers. His uncommon valor won him the Medal of Honor. O'Hare



International Airport in Chicago is named in tribute to him.

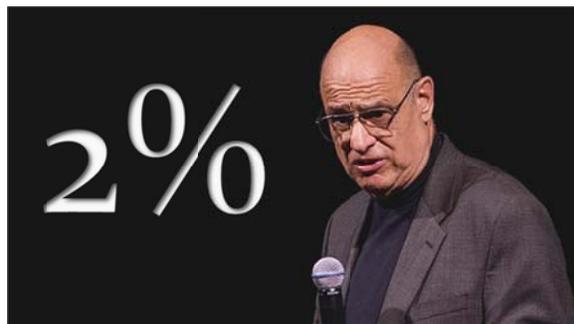
Easy Eddie O'Hare finally obeys ~ reluctantly, with mixed motives, fearfully ~ but nevertheless God's purpose is fulfilled. Easy Eddie is a hero for the rest of us, filled with hesitancy, second guessing, fear ~ finally doing the right thing despite the costs ~ a real hero, a realistic hero.

Is following Jesus the same as "following" on Facebook? I mean, all you have to do on Facebook is click a button of something you like and you are now "following" that person, place or thing. Facebook wants to make it so easy. But following Jesus is never easy. In Facebook culture being a prophet is about being a trending topic, about making the news cycle, about being popular with the most followers and likes.



But Jesus isn't popular. Jesus goes to unpopular people and places. We see him becoming less and less popular as his ministry progresses. Like all the prophets, Jesus is willing to become unpopular for righteousness' sake.¹

If we are honest, we might admit that our own following Jesus is more about what is comfortable and convenient than God's call. From the average Christian giving less than 2% of income to God's work, Tony Campolo points out that we shouldn't sing "*I Surrender All*" but rather if we are honest we would sing, "*I Surrender 2% Of My Life.*"



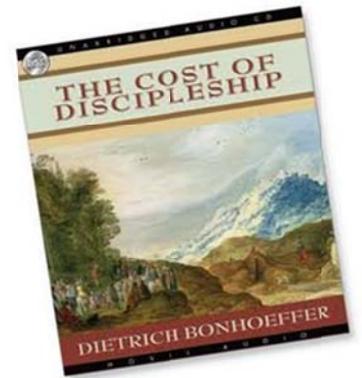
Dietrich Bonhoeffer is also a Jonah. After Hitler came to power in Germany, Bonhoeffer worked to create the Confessing Church to resist Nazism. As Hitler came to suppress the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer had opportunity to serve outside Germany gaining some relief from persecution.



In June 1939, he escaped from Germany to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Amid much inner turmoil, he soon regretted his decision despite strong pressures from his friends to stay in the United States. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr:

"I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany."²

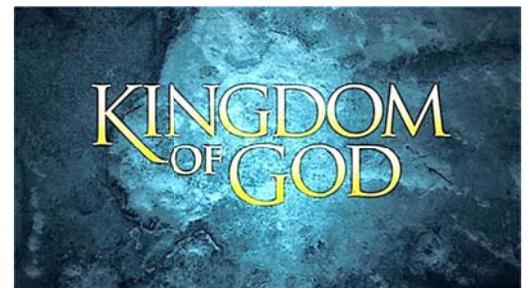
He returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic. He was arrested, and in a brazen act of injustice, executed by the Nazis just before liberation of his prison camp by the Allies. As Bonhoeffer observed in his seminal book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, straight out of Scripture:



"When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] come and die."

Bonhoeffer obeys ~ reluctantly, remorsefully, fearfully ~ and God's purpose is fulfilled. Doing the right thing despite the costs, Bonhoeffer is a prophet for the rest of us, complete with reluctance, regrets, fears ~ a real prophet, a realistic prophet.

Then came Jesus, preaching the good news of God. Not like Jonah, half-hearted at best, but Jesus, as we shall hear soon, preached "as one having authority." Jesus in a loud voice announces, reminiscent of Jonah and John:

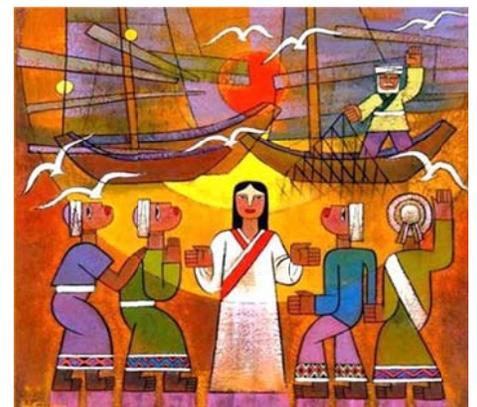


"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."



There is no mention in our text today of any reluctance among the disciples to respond. Simon and Andrew, James and John, all four it says "immediately" dropped everything to follow Jesus. No reluctance at all. However, later in the Gospels, we see the disciples' fears, avarice, jealousy, remorse, and yes reluctance come out. The disciples, men and women, were very human ~ very much like us.

The difference between disciples and erstwhile disciples is not the fears, longings, regrets which we all have in anticipating God's kingdom, but rather how those fears, longings, regrets, reluctant excuses are overcome by courage borne of faith.



We can obey ~ yes, in all honesty, with reluctance, with fear and trembling, second-guessing ourselves, wrestling with our consciences.

Yet, if we obey, God's purpose can be fulfilled in us as well. Doing the right thing despite the costs, we can be heroes of the faith like the myriads who have gone before us: Jonah and Bonhoeffer and Easy Eddie O'Hare and Jeremiah and Isaiah and Hosea and Amos and Simon and Andrew and Mary and Martha and all of the other disciples down through the ages who have chosen to be a part of God's great plan.

¹ Ismael Reiz-Millan, "Living By The Word," *Christian Century*, January 3, 2018, p. 22

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, p. 35