It’s All About the Journey
Mark 1:14-20

Once upon a time, there was a little boy who was told by his teacher to sit down. For a long time, he firmly resisted, but in the end – [because the teacher was much bigger and stronger than he] - the boy sat. But he said to her: “I may be sitting on the outside, but inside I’m still standing up!” I’m sure you all remember, as I do, when you were a kid and had committed some kind of an infraction against a sibling or friend. Remember how your parents would make you apologize: “Now Warren you tell your brother that you’re sorry!” So you did what you had to do; you said the right words, but you didn’t really mean them.

It reminds me of what I like to call the “politicians’ apology”: “I’m sorry that you misunderstand me.....I’m sorry that you misinterpreted what I said.....I’m sorry that you’re so bloody sensitive that you were offended by the comment that I inadvertently made, but by which I really meant no harm at all!”

We knew as children what all parents and teachers eventually learn: that it’s one thing to coerce or threaten or bribe someone to do what we want them to, but it’s quite another thing to create real change in people, so that what they want and what they value – [and not just how they act] - is changed.

We can motivate with guilt, and we can motivate with fear – [and believe me, the church has used both!] – but neither guilt nor fear can bring real change - and certainly not radical transformation.

Three weeks ago, we heard the story of Jonah, the “reluctant prophet” (this could be Part Two of that week’s sermon). To review: Jonah was a Hebrew prophet, called by God to go with a message of warning and repentance to the evil city of Ninevah. Not surprisingly, Jonah’s not real keen about this idea: this city is so evil, he thinks, that it does not deserve the mercy of God. So Jonah takes off in the opposite direction from Nineveh, boarding a ship bound for Tarshish. As this “fantastical tale” unfolds, Jonah is tossed overboard by his shipmates, and is swallowed by a large fish. The fish has Jonah as his guest for 3 days and nights. While Jonah is in the fish’s belly, he sings a “psalm of thanksgiving” – [which is kind of odd when you think about it!] - and then, three days later, the fish spews Jonah out on dry land. So Jonah is back where he started, and God begins again, gives Jonah a second chance, and the people of Ninevah are saved!

I suspect that Jonah was a lot like that little boy who “stayed standing on the inside” when ordered to sit down - or like all of us who have found a way to “sort of, kind of apologize” to someone even though we really didn’t feel sorry at all!

They say that experience is a great teacher – that we learn from experience. Actually, I don’t agree with this – otherwise, why would people keep making the same mistakes over and over again, in spite of past experience? It was Albert Einstein who said that the definition of insanity was “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result”! I think it’s more accurate to say that we learn when we take the time and make the effort to reflect on our experiences. Well, Jonah has learned something from reflecting on this experience, and that is that it is not wise to say “no” to God. So the second time around, Jonah says “yes” - although, as I said before, one suspects that he is saying “yes” on the outside only - that, inside, he is still saying “no”.

What a contrast this story is to the Gospel reading this morning from Mark. There are some significant parallels. The Gospel reading is also about a call. Jesus is passing by the Sea of Galilee, where he saw Simon and Andrew fishing, and then James and John, mending their nets. He called them to follow him. And their response? “Immediately, they left what they were doing, and followed Jesus”.

That’s all. Very simple. Very to-the-point. Very lean. Jesus called.....they followed. We wish we knew more about them and their lives, and what made them so ready to move, so willing to accept the risks and uncertainties and insecurities implied in walking away from all that they knew into a future that was wide open and unknown.

My proposal today is that the life of faithfulness is a journey, a moving from place to place. The story of faith in the Bible is not an account of people sitting down and figuring out what they “believed”. It’s a story of people moving on a journey, a pilgrimage - beginning with Sarah and Abraham, the matriarch and patriarch of our faith, and continuing with Moses.....the prophets.....Jesus.....the disciples.....and Paul.

There is another way of saying the same thing. It comes from Marcus Borg’s book “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time”. Borg says that Christian life is “ultimately not about ‘believing’ or about ‘being good’. Rather......it is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation”.

So…..commit to the journey, the experience, the process, the relationships, and don’t worry so much about the destination, Borg seems to say.

It’s a “journey of transformation” that Simon, Andrew, James and John took, when they willingly left their nets and followed Jesus’ call. It’s also a “journey of transformation” (albeit, a very different one, a much less direct one) that Jonah, the “reluctant prophet”, took when he finally “got the lead out” and travelled to that evil city of Nineveh.

It often seems that moving, travelling, getting up and going somewhere is what faithfulness means in the Bible, and it is ultimately an experience of exhilaration and energy - but, at first, for some, an experience of anxiety, reluctance and fear.

I sometimes think that the problem for many of us is that we see the faith journey as a horrible obligation – [an experience full of “ought’s” and “should’s” and “must’s”] - rather than as an exciting journey, a mysterious adventure to look forward to and to enjoy.

I’ve already referred to two stories this morning: one from the book of Jonah in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the other from the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament. I’d like to introduce a third text now - from the gospel according to Dr. Seuss. “Oh, The Places You’ll Go” may be a book for kids, but it’s also a book for anyone about to answer the call to move into a new future:

Congratulations! Today’s your day.
You’re off to great places.
You’re off and away.
You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
    any direction you choose.
You’re on your own,
    and you know what you know,
And you are the guy who’ll decide where to go!
There are some risks, of course. Dr. Seuss warns that the going will not always be smooth or easy:

I’m sorry to say so,
   but sadly it’s true
that bangups and hangups
can happen to you.
You will come to a place
   where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted,
   but mostly they’re dark.
A place you could sprain
   both your elbow and chin.
Do you dare to stay out?
   Do you dare to go in?

Alvin Toffler, in his book, “Future Shock”, suggests that, in a time of rapid social change when everything is moving and shifting nothing is pinned down and things seem to change all the time, that we are inclined to create for ourselves what Toffler calls “personal security zones” - that is, areas of life that are stable, unchanging, often nostalgically based on the past. It’s what’s at the root of phrases like “the good old days” and “that old time religion”.

We all have “personal security zones”. Do you know what my “personal security zone” is? It’s my cutlery drawer.....it’s my sock drawer.....it’s my pantry – they’re neat and tidy and organized within an inch of their lives! In a world – [and in a life] – where so much seems beyond my control, where chaos all too often seems to reign, I have total control over my cutlery drawer, my sock drawer and my pantry.

I think maybe that’s where Jonah got stuck - in his “personal security zone”. And Jonah’s “personal security zone” said something like this: that God’s love was for people like him, the people of his nation only.....that some people are so evil and vile that they are beyond redemption.....and that God’s call to him was so “off-the-wall”, so outrageous and so radical that the only sensible thing to do was just ignore it and run as far as possible in the opposite direction.

In Jonah’s eyes, Nineveh doesn’t deserve the grace of God. In his mind, the people of this city have already been tried, found guilty and sentenced to die! All that remains for the Ninevites – according to Jonah - is to live out the rest of their sad, pathetic lives and check in at the gates of hell for their final reward! Jonah can’t be bothered with the task of extending a warning to them, because Nineveh’s destiny is a foregone conclusion in his mind. And so he runs.

Contrast that response with the response of Simon, Andrew, James and John in our Gospel reading this morning, who heard Jesus’ call, dropped what they were doing and – [without questioning, negotiating or arguing] – followed! At least initially – [we know how the story ends, so we know that later, many of them denied, betrayed or just ran into hiding] – but at least initially, they seemed to imagine the faith journey as an adventure, and they were motivated not by fear and guilt, but by what seems like a genuine sense of commitment to the journey.

While the disciples responded to their call with a sense of anticipation and excitement, Jonah responded to his call by kicking and screaming – and judging, arguing, excluding and condemning.
All of which poses the question for us, the question we’d just as soon avoid: Who are the people who we think don’t deserve the grace of God? Is there a person, a nation, a group, a sin, an attitude, or an act that we consider outside the realm of God’s grace? Is there something or someone (including ourselves) who we’ve written off completely as either unworthy or impossible as a subject of God’s compassion and mercy?

Intellectually, up ‘here’ in our heads, it’s easy enough for us to say “God’s love is unconditional. God’s love is for all. We don’t earn it or deserve it, we just receive it as a gift.”

That may be what we “believe” intellectually. But practically, emotionally, subjectively, down ‘here’ in our hearts, in our gut.....most of us have our limits, most of us “draw the line” somewhere. My belief that God’s love is unconditional – and that our love should, therefore, also be unconditional – my belief in this principle has been severely tested when faced with real-life situations of people – monsters – who act in unspeakably cruel and evil ways. It’s much harder than it sounds – and certainly easier said than done.

The story of Jonah invites us to examine ourselves, not only as individuals, but also as a “covenant community” and to ask the “hard questions” about who’s in and who’s out, who’s acceptable and who’s not, who’s an insider and who’s an outsider.....and most importantly, who has the right to decide?

Jonah’s actions were direct and obvious. He got on a boat that was headed in the opposite direction from where God was calling him. Our own running may not be so obvious.

Actually, when I think about it, it occurs to me that running from God may not always be a bad thing! It shows, at least, that we take God seriously. And it implies that God cares enough to pursue, like Francis Thompson’s “Hound of Heaven” who follows in hot pursuit.

Always, when people run, God pursues. And Jonah discovers that the boat has not been built that will carry him away from “the presence of God”.

God’s call can be a radical summons to be different, to act differently, to march to a different drummer, to move in a new and different direction. The promise is adventure, surprise, challenge, and – [through it all] – life!

So.....
be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
you’re off to great places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So.....get on your way!