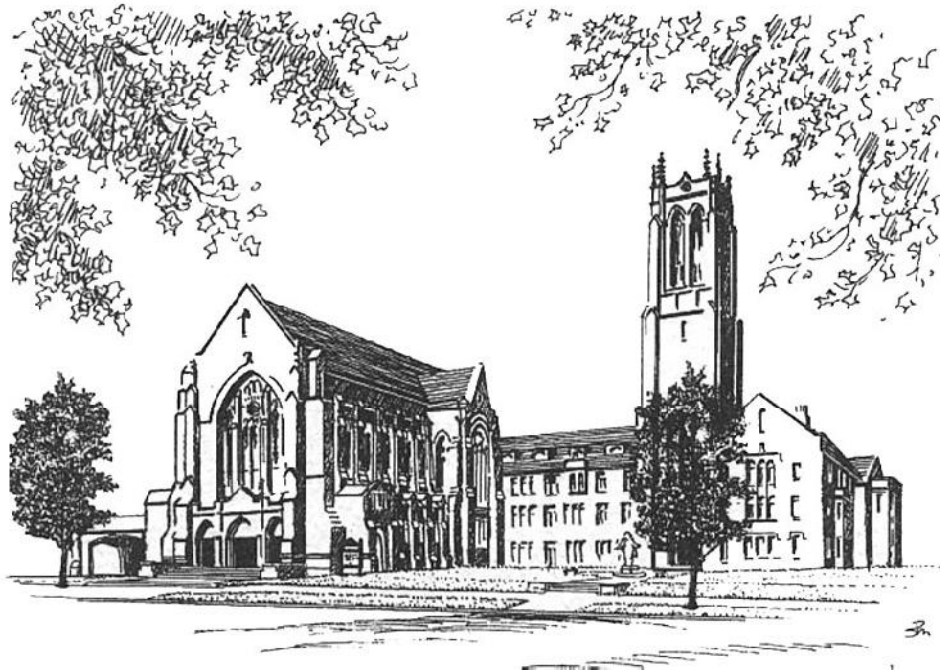


JUST SAY YES  
by  
Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston  
January 22, 2012  
*(Third Sunday after the Epiphany)*  
8:30, 9:45, and 11:05 a.m.



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**Texts:** Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12 (UMH 87); 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

## **Jonah 3:1-5,10**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

<sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

<sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

## **Mark 1:24-20**

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

<sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Cynthia Weems is pastor of First United Methodist Church in Miami, Florida. I got to know her when I was working on my Doctorate of Ministry at St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City. Cynthia was a student there also, and her father, Lovett Weems, was the president of the seminary. Cynthia tells the story about the church she served in central city Kansas City. She says an 11-year-old Hispanic youth named Victor was assigned by the Juvenile Court to do community service hours in her church. Victor hadn't done anything too bad, but he had caused some mischief and damage with his BB gun, so the Juvenile Court gave him the community hours to serve.

Cynthia Weems assigned Victor the task of cleaning up an unused youth room on the third floor of the old church. Victor took the task seriously and turned the old room into a very presentable space, complete with a cross and altar. Victor continued to hang around the church the rest of the summer and even invited some of his friends to come to church. Something about having an opportunity to do something that matters had made a difference in Victor's life. He had turned an old room into a meaningful space for kids to come hang out with the preacher and talk about life and faith around Bible study and music. It had meant so much to Victor that his friends noticed. So much so that one of his friends said to my friend Cynthia, "Hey, pastor, how can I get some of those community hours?"

Well, hopefully, kids don't have to get into trouble to be asked to do something meaningful.

Victor responded in a positive way when he was given the opportunity to do something significant. There is something in all of us that wants to respond to the opportunity to do something significant. Two of our scripture passages today are about people being asked to do something significant, to say yes to God.

To be fair, Jonah was a very reluctant prophet. Jonah of course is not a literal story about a man being swallowed by a large fish. It is more like a parable, a commentary on the life and times in which it is written. We don't know who wrote the little book or exactly when it was written. Scholars, however, think that it may have been written in the 7th or 8th century B.C. The great political and military power at that time was the Assyrian Empire, and Nineveh was its capitol. The Assyrians were great enemies of the Israelites. Indeed they had conquered much of Israel and ruled over it rather ruthlessly. Jonah's call to do something significant is to be a prophet to the Assyrians. If you know the story, you remember that Jonah runs away from that calling. That's when he is caught in the storm at sea, thrown overboard, swallowed by the large fish for three days and then spit up on the shore. Our reading today picks up the story after all of those events.

So, it helps to remember what has gone on before when we read, “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go be a prophet to the Assyrians.” This time he goes. We know from the rest of the story that his clear expectation is that God will destroy Nineveh. Instead, after a very half-hearted one sentence sermon in the midst of a vast city, everyone in Nineveh repents of their sins and God does not destroy them.

We should not miss the irony and social commentary here. It is really quite remarkable in that setting that the book of Jonah would offer an invitation of forgiveness of your worst enemies. The significant thing Jonah is asked to do is to be an instrument of peace in a very hostile world. In fact, the word Jonah in Hebrew means “dove,” a symbol of peace.

Who in our world will step forward to be an instrument of peace in a hostile environment?

Who will be the prophet to begin to build a relationship with our enemies?

The little book of Jonah is so relevant in our hostile world for someone to hear the call to do something significant as an instrument of peace.

Mark’s gospel records the story of Jesus calling disciples. Simon and Andrew, James and John were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. That’s how they made their living and took care of their families. But when Jesus called them to become disciples, to do something significant, they left their nets and their families and followed.

Mark says immediately he called them and immediately they left. Immediately is one of Mark’s favorite words. He uses it 27 times in his short gospel. Who knows why they were willing to leave everything and follow Jesus. Maybe they were bored with fishing or bored with their way of life or they thought it was a call to adventure, or maybe it was because someone asked them to do something significant with their lives, even Jesus.

To fish for people is to change the focus of their lives from making a living to engaging people with things that matter. Maybe the call to do something significant for you is to keep your job but change the attitude or focus of what you do. You have to make a living, but there is a bigger picture.

How do you treat people in the process?

Where are the opportunities within the perimeters of what you are doing now to do something significant, to make a difference in someone’s life or in many people’s lives?

Some people fish for people while they continue to fish for fish. Jesus didn’t call everyone to leave their vocation, just 12. He did call everyone to do something that matters beyond just making a living. Whether you drop your nets and go or

keep your nets and show up the next day with a new attitude, Jesus asks all of us to do something that makes a difference for someone. Whatever your vocation or profession is right now, seeing yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ will make a difference in what you do and how you do it.

The hymn that we sang just before the sermon today is a great old hymn, *Jesus Calls Us*. Mark and I don't usually talk about the hymns we use in worship. Sometimes we do, but not too often. He chooses the hymns and I preach, both based on the lectionary readings of the day or season. Usually there is a confluence. You are actually given quite a bit of information about a hymn just on the page in the hymnal. For instance, who wrote the words and when, who composed the music and when, what the tune name is, what the general theme of the hymn is and what scripture it might be based on. There is always more to the story if you care to look.

Cecil Frances Alexander wrote the words to *Jesus Calls Us*. She was the wife of an Anglican priest who eventually became a bishop. She wrote many hymns and was equally at home in the bishop's palace or working in the slums with poor children. Perhaps her best known hymn is *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, which children especially love. Two of the stanzas in her hymn *Jesus Calls Us* are worth noting for their relevance in today's world.

Verse 3 says, "Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store, from each idol that would keep us saying, 'Christian, love me more.'" Jesus calls us to not get so caught up in the allure of the things of this world that we forget to love Jesus and his ways more.

Verse 4 adds, "In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease, still he calls, in cares and pleasures, 'Christian, love me more than these.'" Jesus calls us to love him more than the pleasures of life, a great reminder in our day of affluence. Anyone who does something significant loves God more than self and people more than things. Jesus still calls people to follow, to say yes in our world today.

Some of you might know the name Loren Eiseley. He was an American writer who felt equally at home in science and anthropology. His keen mind made him a great observer of the human experience. I have read excerpts of his essays through the years. His most famous work was *The Immense Journey*. The words from 1946 seem very relevant. In it, he observed, "The need is not really for more brains, the need is now for a gentler, more tolerant people than those who won for us against the ice, the tiger and the bear. The hand that hefted the ax, out of some blind allegiance to the past, fondles the machine gun lovingly. It is a habit man will have to break to survive, but the roots go very deep."

I think Jesus calls disciples today who will embody a gentler, more tolerant way. Our more aggressive tendencies have resulted in too many wars, too much hostile rhetoric, and more concern for self than the common good.

Victor's young life found meaning when someone asked him to do something significant. Jonah was God's instrument of peace in a reluctant prophetic adventure amongst his enemies. Those early disciples by the Sea of Galilee traveled a different road when Jesus asked them to follow him. Poets and philosophers among us through the years have identified the best and the worst instincts within us and encouraged us toward our best selves.

Disciples today are those who say yes to God's invitation to allow the best that is within you to guide your words and actions. Any word or deed, great or small, that nudges us toward more peaceful, gentler lifestyles and relationships, is something significant.