

Welcome

*We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the News that God is in our land*

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes, they know we are Christians by our love*

St. Paul's United Church of Christ, God is calling.

In our namesake St. Paul's "Letter to the Romans," Christians like us are urged to renew our minds, to discern God's will, and to offer our entire selves as "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." Paul tells us, "this is your true and proper worship."¹

But when that call comes, where do we find the strength to answer? Today's scripture offers two very different possibilities. Some of us, like Jonah, have to learn the hard way. Others lean in to Christ and community, and find their strength there. Either way, repentance and love are required. Are you ready to answer your call?

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome to join us in that search here.

Please rise as you are able for the Call to Worship.

Sermon

A man has a garden. This is a good, kind, loving, gentle man. His garden has vegetables to eat, shade to sit under, flowers to meditate on, and vegetation to serve the local ecosystem. By the back fence, the man has planted milkweed, to attract and serve monarch butterflies.

One day, this man notices a monarch chrysalis not far from the milkweed bush. He wants to protect it. He takes it inside, and builds a butterfly house. Week after week, the man tends the house and watches the chrysalis. After a while, when the time is right, he sees it change, and then the butterfly starts to emerge.

The man watches the new monarch struggle, and it is hard for him to see. He imagines himself, and what it would feel like to be trapped like a butterfly, struggling to break free. The man cannot bear to watch any longer, so he takes some shears, and carefully snips away the remaining barriers. The butterfly is free.

¹ Romans 12:1-2

But the butterfly did not have the opportunity to push its own way out. It was denied the process of becoming a butterfly. Its wings were shriveled and ineffective. It could not fly as it was meant. Eventually, despite the man's best efforts, the butterfly died.

There's a cultural theorist I like to read. His name is Joseph Campbell. He looks at movies and stories and sacred texts, and finds connections--the unifying themes that make our stories human. His most famous theory is called "The Hero with a Thousand Faces."² From Jesus to Luke Skywalker, Campbell claims, the heroes of human imagination must all go through certain stages. One of those stages is to go deep inside some sort of "cave" or womb or chrysalis, only to emerge stronger and better, and ready to face the world. Campbell calls this stage--and here's the connection to today's scripture--the "Belly of the Whale."³

In today's reading, we find Jonah just after he emerges from the *dag gadol*, or "giant fish" that had swallowed him.⁴ I know many of you know the story. The city of Nineveh had become wicked, and was in danger of receiving God's wrath. God called Jonah to go and prophesy, so the people would understand their sin. Jonah would not or could not bring himself to do this, and so he attempted to flee. The boat he took was overtaken by God in the form of a storm. The sailors discover that Jonah is the reason. They throw him overboard. He is swallowed by a giant fish. Jonah repents, and God offers him another chance. He goes to Nineveh and shares the word of God. The people there repent too, and God offers them a second chance.

So here is the theological question: *could Jonah have been an honest broker of repentance for Nineveh if he had not just repented himself? Could he have saved that city without passing through the belly of the whale first? Was this Jonah's chrysalis or womb--the thing that made him strong enough to serve his purpose?*

Joseph Campbell says sometimes we need the belly of the whale. It's part of what makes us human.

The other scripture from today--the Gospel, or "Good News"--shows us a very different kind of call.⁵ This call requires repentance too, but the strength Simon and Andrew and James and John needed to do the work of God did not need to rise from suffering. Instead, Jesus says, "repent, and believe in the good news." Jesus says, "follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

One good way to understand the Christian Bible is to see it as the single story of an evolving covenant between God and God's people--who, it turns out, are all of us. The earliest

² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-95

⁴ Jonah 3:1-5, 10

⁵ Mark 1:14-20

covenants hang on obedience to the will of God. The covenant that Christ brings hangs on love of God and love of neighbor.⁶ In the last couple sermons we've talked about how that Christian love brings the Holy Spirit, and how the Holy Spirit brings a number of good fruit, including more love to continue the cycle.

Jonah was bound to follow the will of God, was punished for his failure, and was given another chance upon repentance. The fishermen in Mark were bound to follow Jesus, to hold each other in community, and to do God's work together in love.

For me, this is one of the reasons the Gospel of Christ really is good news. We do not have to do this work alone. We are bound to each other, called to fellowship and in covenant, and our strength rises from that our bond.

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⁶ Mark 12:30-31