

Responding Immediately

By Rachel Coleman, Ph.D.

January 21, 2024—Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Jonah 3.1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20

This week's readings all have to do with the theme of readiness, or preparation – not necessarily in a material way, but interiorly, dispositionally, we might even say spiritually. What could the Ninevites, the people of an 8th century BC Assyrian city, have in common with the apostles Peter, Andrew, James, and John? Well, it seems that all of them were ready when Lord's call came. After Jonah, the reluctant prophet from Israel, proclaims to the Ninevites both God's displeasure and the consequences thereof, we are told that “the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and everyone, great and small, put on a sackcloth” (Jonah 3.5). One wonders why the Ninevites were so convicted; we know that many prophets were much less successful than Jonah in convincing their hearers of their need for repentance. And most of those prophets were not sent to Gentiles, but to Israel herself!

Crisis and Decision

Nine centuries later, we have recorded in Mark's Gospel that Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry, called Simon – later given the name/title of Peter – and his brother Andrew, and also the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. All four of them are literally in the middle of fishing, which would have been their livelihood – the way they all provided for themselves – when Jesus calls them, and all four of them respond without hesitation. We read the word “immediately” twice in this short passage; in Greek the word is εὐθύς or *euthys*, which occurs 41 times in Mark's Gospel. *Euthys* appears with much greater frequency in Mark's Gospel than in the other three (five times in Matthew, once in Luke, and three times in John). Mark's frequent use of the word *euthys*, especially in comparison to its infrequent appearance in the other Gospels, is ripe for contemplation: there is a sense of urgency in Mark's Gospel that we see reflected in the actions of the two sets of brothers: Peter and Andrew first, and then James and John shortly thereafter, *immediately* leave what they are doing (their very livelihoods!) and follow Jesus after being called. In some sense they must have recognized what the Ninevites recognized: that this is God calling them, and such a call requires an immediate and full response. When the Lord calls, there is no time for ambivalence or wavering, there is no time for anything but acting directly – indeed, time itself changes when God calls: what was, before the Lord's call, a space for preparation, is, after it, a moment of decision. The Greek word for decision is *krisis*. Once God calls, we are in a time of crisis.

This is what Paul points to in his first letter to the Corinthians: “the appointed time has grown short” (1 Cor 7.29). God has entered the world, become man, and because of the this, the shape and tenor of time, and our actions in it, must be different. God's call is no longer mediated by the prophets, but he now declares it directly. The Word of God has become man: he has entered time and space and therefore time and space are forever changed. Time is no longer a preparatory period, but rather a playing out of the crisis, that is, the decision for or against God. This is why Paul writes that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7.31). It is not that this world no longer matters, or that events in it do not matter, which might seem like what Paul is arguing when he writes that those who mourn should act as if they are not, or those who rejoice should act as if they are not; rather, Paul is pointing out that now that God

has become man, died for our sins, and resurrected, everything is changed. Everything is secondary to the reality of the Word become flesh. And we must remember that the Word becomes flesh *for us*, which means that some sort of action on our part is now expected. God's call always induces a crisis: non-decision is not an option.

We should note, however, that in order to respond with haste to God's call, it seems that a certain disposition on our part is needed. We do not get very much information about either the Ninevites or the four future apostles before the Lord's call to them, but we do know someone in these stories who did not respond immediately, and that is the prophet Jonah himself. Famously (infamously?), Jonah flees from God's call to preach to the Ninevites, and as a result, he ends up in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights, foreshadowing Jesus's time in the tomb. In a twist of fate, we see in the *Book of Jonah* an example of how one should respond to God's call not in the prophet, but in the Ninevites, who, upon hearing Jonah's accusations, immediately recognize their own sin and respond accordingly: with penance and fasting. The Ninevites, much more than Jonah himself, demonstrate what it means to respond *immediately*. No doubt they were sinning, otherwise the Lord would not have sent Jonah to them, but their decisive action in response to Jonah's proclamation indicates that they were ready, on some level, to respond to the call. Jonah, on the other hand, resists God's call, and, even after the entire city of Nineveh is saved, seems to be still rather indisposed to listen to God: the last lines we hear from Jonah are that he is "angry enough to die" (Jonah 4.9). An entire city has started following God, and Jonah is still angry. The Ninevites, on the other hand, who respond immediately, are saved.

Of course, a decisive response to God's call does not mean that one's life will be without suffering. This we see clearly in the lives of those four apostles Jesus calls while they are fishing in the Sea of Galilee; three out of four end up martyred for preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. We should never deceive ourselves into thinking that if we respond appropriately to God's call, we will be spared pain and suffering in this life. To be a Christian is not to avoid pain – indeed, sometimes it means just the opposite. But we also know that this life is not our final reality – that is yet to come. As Paul writes, "the present form of this world is passing away." This life is not ultimate – God is ultimate, and this is why, when he calls, we respond immediately, knowing everything else – mourning, rejoicing, possessions – is secondary.

Readiness to Know God

This brings us to a dilemma of sorts: we know that everything is changed, the world is changed, since God entered into it. In and through this entering in– the incarnation – God has definitively called each and every one of us. There is ultimately one decision: for or against God. But we still live in time – we still have to deal with mourning, and rejoicing, and possessions, so how are we to heed Paul's advice of acting like we do not? And this is where cultivating an interior disposition of readiness seems especially important. It cannot be that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were completely passive until Jesus calls out to them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The four would-be apostles were, we must assume, somehow ready for this call, preparing and prepared in some way, even though none of them could have predicted it. To hear the Lord's call and respond immediately indicates a kind of trust in the Lord these four men had already cultivated in themselves. We do encounter those in the Gospels whom Jesus calls and do not respond – immediately or otherwise. To respond to the Lord's call the way Peter, Andrew, James, and John did – *immediately* – means that they already knew the Lord and trusted him, and that is why they could recognize the Lord and his call. We should be doing the same.

This, it seems to me, is what we are asked to do in this time of God having already revealed himself, but not yet returning with and in the fullness of time. We are being asked to cultivate a kind of disposition: a readiness that allows us to know and recognize God. And in some ways, we have it much easier than those four would-be apostles fishing on the Sea of Galilee: Christ has already died and resurrected, and given us the Church, who communicates God through herself and the sacraments, and we encounter and know him in these ways. And yet, the fact that we live in a time of crisis, that is, a time of decision for or against God, is not always alive in our awareness. It should be, however, and we need to cultivate this inner disposition of alertness. This is what Paul is trying to impress on the Corinthians in his first letter to them: it is not that wives, and mourning, and rejoicing have no reality or are unimportant, but that we know with certainty that all of these are secondary realities – secondary, of course, to the ultimate reality, which is God himself. Because we know God is the ultimate reality, and we have been given certain knowledge of that reality in and through the Church, everything else needs to be properly ordered – that is to say, in service to God, and in service of loving and worshiping God. But accomplishing this proper ordering in our day-to-day lives takes discipline, prayer, and reception of the sacraments – in other words, living life with and in the Church, so that we may know and recognize God's call when it comes.

The would-be apostles on the Sea of Galilee that day could have easily made excuses along the lines of their responsibilities. We all make these kinds of excuses every day. The prophet Jonah does not even provide an excuse – he simply does not want to heed God’s word and runs away. But if we want to take seriously Paul’s declaration that “the present form of the world is passing away,” as well as the example of both the Ninevites and those four future apostles fishing on the Sea of Galilee, then we need not just be listening for God’s call, but responding to it *right now*, in and through his Church. This is that for which the Lord has created and given his Church: so that we may know him and recognize him. Living our lives with and in the Church allows us to cultivate a disposition such that we will always be able to respond to God *immediately*.

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For Further Reading

- *Benedict XVI, [General Audience](#)*
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- *Benedict XVI, [General Audience](#)*
- *Benedict XVI, [General Audience](#)*
- *David Bentley Hart, "[God or Nothing](#)"*

In Short . . .

- *Both the Ninevites and the apostles whom Jesus calls at the beginning of Mark's gospel demonstrate for us how to respond to God's call: that is, immediately.*
- *Paul's first letter to the Corinthians implores them to order their lives correctly, that is, with the knowledge of God as the ultimate reality and everything else being second to him.*
- *We live in a time of "already" and "not yet"; God has already revealed himself but not yet returned, and so we are asked to respond to his call immediately in and through the Church.*