

When I was pregnant with Cameron, we had a hard time deciding on a name. We had narrowed it down to two names – Dustin or Jonah. I liked Jonah and Andy liked Dustin. We had a poll set-up for our friends and family to vote on which name they liked best. It was pretty evenly divided, and it became a huge fiasco. One day, I told my grandmother about this whole thing, and I asked, “Don’t you think Jonah is better?” She scrunched up her nose as if she smelled something bad and shook her head, “no.”

I asked, “Really? Why don’t you like the name Jonah?” She said, “Do you remember the story of Jonah in the Bible?” “I said, ‘Of course. He was swallowed by the whale after he ran from God. It’s a story about second chances.’” My grandmother said, ‘Yes, that’s the G-rated version that you were told in Sunday School as a child. You should read the whole story before you name your child Jonah.’”

I took her advice and read the whole story, and I have to admit, she had a good point. So, let’s start at the beginning about what we know about Jonah. The biblical character of Jonah is only mentioned three times in the Bible. All we know about him is that he was the son of Amittai, which in Hebrew means “truth.”

Ordinary Jonah, the son of truth, was minding his own business one day, when God called him to be a prophet. God wanted to speak through him, to deliver a message to the Assyrians. The message was a warning that they would be destroyed if they did not repent and turn to God. The son of truth was called to speak God’s truth, to a people who had never heard the truth. They were still worshipping gods and goddesses and were living sinful lives.

However, the Assyrians were mortal enemies with the Jewish people as they had conquered them and took the remaining people into captivity. Sure, Jonah was probably fearful of going on their soil and speaking God’s truth by himself. But, what was really causing Jonah’s reluctance was a fear that the Assyrians would repent. He didn’t want them to repent and experience God’s mercy. He wanted them to be pay for what they had done. Jonah’s deep hatred and resentment caused him to run from his calling.

As the first verses tell us, there was no bargaining or negotiating with God. When Jonah hears God’s call, he just leaves. He tries to get as far away from God as he can. On a biblical map, Tarshish is the farthest city from Nineveh. Jonah was probably thinking in that time that he was going to the end of the earth. Yet, he learns that we can never escape God’s presence. Even when we flat-out refuse our callings, God is still there, waiting for us to reach out.

The part of the story that was not included in the scripture reading, but most of you know, is that Jonah cannot outrun God. While on the boat, a terrible storm comes up and threatens the lives of Jonah’s shipmates. They are terrified that the boat will sink. They are praying to their gods and nothing is happening. They look around and find Jonah snoozing in the hull. Even in the midst of chaos, which is caused by Jonah’s disobedience, he sleeps peacefully. The current crisis is not keeping him up at night. So often, we may not care about the negative consequences of refusing our call, but it can harm others. They become victims of our consequences.

The captain wakes up Jonah and tells him to get up and pray to his God. But, Jonah doesn't. Instead he tells the crew to throw him overboard. He would rather die than call out to God or acknowledge why he is refusing his call. When the others find out whom his God is, they start praying to the one true God. They learn that God is truth.

As Jonah sinks to the depths of the sea, God is still there. Something finally happens in the "pit of despair," in the belly of the fish, that breaks Jonah. He calls out to God and finally answers his call. This isn't the end of the story. Jonah doesn't have a big conversion experience. He obeys God, but he still doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He said, "Yes," to God, but his heart wasn't transformed.

Jonah goes to Nineveh and delivers God's message to the Assyrians – the one-sentence warning. No more and no less. It was as if Jonah said, "Fine, God. I'll do it." He walks into the middle of the city and says, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (v.4). I imagine that he is probably looking around, expecting that either no one hears him or pays attention to him or perhaps laughs at him, thinking maybe he's crazy.

But, they don't. They believe him and repent. Even the king steps off his throne and repents. It worked – and Jonah is ticked off! He didn't want it to work. This calling from God was not something he desired. He didn't want to be called for this. He didn't want the Assyrians to be given mercy – he wanted them to suffer the consequences of their actions and their ignorance.

What Jonah never learns is that God called him for this, to work out his inner

conflict. Yes, God calls us to callings that help other people, but the main purpose is that God is working something out within us. God turns our misery into ministry. As I've shared before, I had a big beef with the church with the abuse of power and the hypocrisy of the church leaders I encountered. When I sensed that God was calling me to be a pastor, I was like, "What are you doing, God? I have a lot of baggage with the church." God said, "Go, be the change you want to see in the church." Paul persecuted Christians, and God called him to be the very thing he persecuted.

God called Jonah to deliver a warning of destruction in order for Jonah to repent. Not just the Assyrians. God used the Assyrians because that was the button to push within Jonah that caused all the hatred, anger, and prejudice to spill out. These are the things that God was trying to work out in Jonah. The story ends with a question from God: "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:9). Jonah never answers.

Now, I understood what my grandmother was talking about. I admit that I liked the sound of the name Jonah more than the biblical character. The story of how we chose the name Cameron will have to wait for another time.

God calls ordinary people to do God's extraordinary work, which is often to work out our own junk in order to be reconciled with God. Our callings are not about what we can do. They are about what God can do through us. Despite Jonah's reluctance and deep hatred, he half-heartedly mentions God's name, and God changed the hearts of the mariners and the Assyrians. We never know for sure if Jonah's heart was

ever changed, but his silence leads us to think it wasn't.

God never calls us to do things we desire. If we find ourselves hesitant, resistant, reluctant, and downright refusing God's call, dig deeper to find out the root of the resistance. It is there, that we'll find our call. God calls ordinary people, so God can do extraordinary work within us and through us. What is God calling you to do? What is God trying to work out within you? Let us not be like Jonah who refuses God. Let us allow God to transform our hearts. Amen.