

Jonah 3:1-5,10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany 3B
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The Call

I have a picture on my refrigerator of my son, decked out from head to toe in his cowboy gear. Even at age 3, he had a sense of style that rivaled most anyone I knew, and the boy would dress for every event. Watching the Sorcerer's Apprentice? Put on the cape and the wizard hat. Reading Peter Pan? Put on your eye patch and pirate hat and grab your sword. Going to the fair? Put on your boots, strap on your holster to carry your most favored alligator squirt gun - and grab your hat. My son taught me a lot about really being present, so when it was time to go to the fair, I got dressed up too— I pulled on my Levi's, put on my Stetson and dug around til I found my cowgirl boots too.

There's a picture of me from that day, when a handful of moms and our kids went to the fair all decked out in our cowperson gear. But my picture isn't about the outfit – my picture speaks of a story of calling unlike anything that has happened before or since, something so immediate, so urgent SO strong that I never even stopped to consider what I was doing. I had left our gaggle of moms and kids to go find something to drink for the little ones who were petting the goats and the cows and the bunnies. In order to make my way back to where the food concessions were, I had to pass by several very tall and very large round moveable cages. They were made of something that looked like scaffolding, with sections that were hooked together with metal connectors, and doors that were clamped shut with large sliding bolts. Most of the cages were empty and most of the doors were shut tight. But as I was hurrying by, trying to get to the water and back to the action with the cows and the goats and the bunnies, I noticed that one of the cage doors was open and inside that cage, sitting all alone on a raised platform, was the biggest, most beautiful, most regal and real Siberian tiger I had ever seen. And from the moment I saw him, I was drawn so strongly, so immediately that it never occurred to me to do anything but go.

And go, I did. I walked into that open-door cage, walked right up to the tiger and put my arm around his back. And before I even noticed it was happening, tears began to roll down my cheeks. I was utterly awestruck by this stunning creature and the unimaginable, amazing, impossible and glorious gift that was given to me in that moment. That's really how it was, you see. I didn't decide to go and see that tiger. I didn't think about the fact that he could have maimed me with a swipe of his paw, let alone what he could have done with his teeth. I simply saw the open door, and the mysterious, beautiful and unspeakably compelling creature there – right there – within my reach, and there was nothing to do but go to him.

I think about that story every time I read Mark's version of what happened for Simon, Andrew, James and John that day on the beach. There they were, ordinary people doing the ordinary things of their ordinary lives and wham, something extraordinary happened. In Mark's gospel, there's a lot of wham! There is a great sense of urgency and so very many things happen

immediately! No time for discernment, for weighing pros and cons, for questioning the sanity of your decision. When Jesus called, immediately Simon and Andrew left their nets. When Jesus saw James and John, immediately he called them and they left their father and their nets and their boat filled with the hired men. Immediately... Immediately.

What I think most of us would say, is that most of the time we just don't experience that sense of urgency and immediacy in God's call to us. Not only that, but it can seem very hard even to know what God is calling us into. That calling – vocare – the root of our word "vocation" can be very confusing. "What is God's plan for me?" we ask. And we struggle because we are somehow unable to figure out just exactly what God's plan is.

I have to say – and please hear me out – that God having a plan for my life doesn't really resonate for me. Oh it isn't that I don't know that God loves me, of course I do. I know that my name is written on the palm of God's own hand (*Isaiah 49:16*), that God knows every hair on my head (*Luke 12:7, Matt 10:30*), that I am God's own beloved daughter (*Romans 8:15*) and that the bit of divine that God has planted in me will always be known uniquely and specifically and specially by God. I know too, that there are times in our lives when we know we are on the right path, in step with the universe, doing what God would have us do. But that doesn't necessarily mean that God has a plan for me that will be played out from the moment I was born until I breathe my last breath. For me, that sort of pre-planned thinking somehow denies the incarnation.

I think what the incarnation means, at least in part, is that God became human, and because God became human, somehow we humans came to share in God's divinity. God came to be with us, but even more breathtaking than that, is the reality that God became one of us. And when God did that, we – you and I - came into a union with God that made us co-creators, not just of our own lives, but of the life of the world. It means that with God, we actually have something to say about the plan of our lives. After all, when the people of Nineveh heard Jonah preach hell-fire and damnation, they changed their lives, and that changed God.

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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. (Jonah 3:5,10)

So if it is true that God doesn't actually have everything all planned out from beginning to end, what does that say to us about our lives? Are we left to float through life without direction, conviction or clarity? Are we to assume that since the historical Jesus is no longer walking around on the earth calling each of our names that we have no vocation, no call? I don't think so.

I think the trick to recognizing the thing God is calling us in to, is to change our focus from our volunteer work or our jobs, and to focus on our relationships. Our relationships with God, yes, but also relationships with ourselves and with each other. I think we make a mistake when we limit our thoughts of vocation or call to our work in the world. Even as I know that I am called to ordained ministry, that call, that vocation, my vocation as a priest is about sacramental relationships. My relationships with all of you, and my relationship with God. You see, we're all uniquely gifted. Each one of you have a call, a vocation, just like I do. And each of us has been

given our particular gifts in order to build up the Body of Christ, and to love God's world back into wholeness.

Our responsibility is to discover what our vocation is, so that we can offer our God given gifts for the life of the world and for building up the body of Christ. People get all worked up about not wanting to be responsible for Evangelism, but evangelism is simply walking around in the world as though the Good News of Jesus Christ is what matters. When Simon, Andrew, James and John heard that call, Mark tells us that "immediately they dropped their nets" and walked into a relationship with Jesus that would change them forever. It was their relationship with Jesus that was their vocation, and it's your vocation and my vocation too. Each one of us follows in a way that is as unique and particular as we are. Jesus called those fishing brothers to follow in a very particular way – but that was their way, not your way or my way. Following Jesus isn't something that is vague and drifty... it's particular, immediate and incarnate.

I follow Jesus by living a life steeped in the Word and Sacraments and by deepening my sacramental relationships. I follow Jesus by cooking and gardening too. How do you follow? Is it by being a tender mother? By being a loving daughter or son-in-law? Is it by being a teacher or a volunteer? Is it by looking out for the ones who seem lost, by doing work that you love, or by doing work that you don't love because it allows you to care for your family in ways that matter deeply to you? Is it by tending your garden or being generous with your money? Is it by planting the seeds of justice and compassion in the wider world?

Listen to the ordinariness of your extraordinary and God-given life. Nurture your relationships with God, with yourself, with the people and creation around you. Because these are the ways that you too can drop everything unimportant and immediately follow Jesus. I'm actually quite sure you're already doing that. It will be good to notice and to tell one another what you see.

In my treasure box, there's a picture of me with my arm around a great Siberian tiger whose name was Popeye. He was blind in one eye and in his old age he had become something of a love bug... a giant and wild creature who wanted to be a lap kitty. His trainer had probably been there all along, but I didn't see him... I only had eyes for Popeye. That's how it is when we're called, when God gets hold of us, when we decide to listen and to follow Jesus. Come with me – we'll all find our way together. Amen



Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?