

## ANSWERING THE CALL

*The Rev. Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie, Epiphany III 2021*

“And immediately (Simon and his brother Andrew) left their nets and followed Jesus.” Next, *James* and brother *John* left their father, mending their nets, practically mid-stitch.

I’ve always been intimidated and a bit perplexed by this kind of call story. In some ways, these followers of Jesus seem irresponsible. Simon is not only leaving his family but leaving his *wife* and presumably, *children*. There is no “due diligence,” no vetting of this upstart prophet. What, exactly, are Jesus’ *credentials*?

Of course, Mark is not interested in breaking-news-reporting style. Mark is trying to tell us just how *magnetic* this young preacher was. Something in Jesus’ words and even more in his *being* made his call irresistible.

Despite their quick response, we know that they would become *imperfect* followers of the call. James and John would try to lord it over their fellow disciples. *Thomas* asked a lot of questions. And we all know about Simon Peter...

I relate more to some of the *others* Jesus asked to follow him: “Yes, sure, but just let me bury my father.” Or, “I’ve got to check on the yoke of oxen I just bought.” Or, “I just got married. Maybe sometime later.”

I relate to these excuses because I *too* was hesitant in following the call I’ve felt my whole life... even though my sense of call was impossible to fulfill: I was female. As a child, I actually played at celebrating the Eucharist. Earlier, at the age of five, I was told I once “preached” to my mother and grandmother. In the style of then-popular Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, I wrapped a blanket around me – as if a cape – and stood on an ottoman and began to declaim.

My mother and grandmother collapsed into laughter. In response, I stood up to my full height and proclaimed, “THIS is not funny!”

When I first began testing out my call as a young adult, I wasn’t sure. I attended one of the conferences Virginia Seminary holds for prospective students. This would have been, say, 1973, and when I attended the conference I was

surrounded by mostly male people claiming to have practically been tapped on the *shoulder* by Jesus. So I declined to go further. But the instinct wouldn't go away. Two years later, I entered the Seminary and the Diocese of Washington's pre-ordination process *anyway*.

I had not been "tapped on the shoulder": I wondered if I were "religious" enough. Now, forty-five-or so years later, I just don't worry about all that. I just try to live as faithfully as I can, and offer that up to God's love.

My original hesitancy, the reasons (excuses?) I used to defer *acting* on my call, reflect in a small way the *over-the-top refusal* of Jonah to answer *his* clear and direct call.

God sent Jonah to preach repentance to the Gentile people of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, which was located in modern-day *Iraq*. Assyria had been a traditional threat to Israel's very *existence*. Jonah simply could not *stand* the idea of these non-believers being spared what he considered that nation's just desserts.

*In other words, Jonah put himself in the place of God.*

So we have the wonderful stories of Jonah shipping out to a country far away; his shipmates realizing that *he* was the cause of the storms threatening capsizes; the swallowing then spewing out of Jonah; his final but grudging preaching to the people of Nineveh. And then, even after their sincere repentance, *still* Jonah resents his call. He wishes he could just *die*.

But God is faithful to God's own vision of love for *all* people, even those *we* think of as our "enemies." God asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?" "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty-thousand persons, who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

We don't know whether Jonah ever became more accepting. But this dramatic story leads me to consider the depth and breadth of our *own* calls.

Maybe the most important part of our calls are *not only* the sweeping, life-altering decisions. Maybe the integrity of our call lies in the way we simply *live* every day. Maybe the *living* every day is the *heart* of our call.

The Jonah story raises challenging questions you and I must ask ourselves: How do we *live* in the world? How do we live in our own *households*? Do we give ourselves over to frustrations about the supposed “failings” of people around us?

On a larger scale... do we ignore our baptismal covenant, dividing people into pre-assigned, pre-*ranked* groups? “Us versus them”? Usually, but not always, *unconsciously*?

Sometimes, do we turn our frustrations against *ourselves*? Whatever our failings, do we refuse to forgive *ourselves* as God has already forgiven *us*? Can we not believe, every time we hear the words of absolution, “Should I not be concerned about *you*, my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased?”

Call stories are not only about leaving the nets to go to seminary, or law school, or becoming a parent, or having to deal with unexpected illness or losses that may befall us.

Looking deeper, we are being called to a level of faithfulness challenging us *whatever* our circumstances:

To *be*... simply... a loving Child of God.