

Sermon Text for May 5, 2019

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Jonah 3:10 – 4:5, Romans 9:10-19a

“Unwilling instruments”

We find ourselves back in Acts what seems like a very long time. It has been a month that we have been able to see the life of the early church. All along we said that we would take what is good from Acts, and try to learn from them and implement the good that we read from Scripture in Acts. The last time we were in Acts we saw the conversion of Saul, the murderer of Christians. He joins the long list of sketchy characters who serve the kingdom of God. Think of Jacob and what a terrible person he was as he was growing up. Think of Moses as a murderer just so that his people would think he was good guy, before he headed into the desert and ran away. But God turns all of these people, like I hope He has turned you, into an instrument for his kingdom.

Last week we had youth Sunday and the youth of our church really did a great job. They allowed us to come and worship God together, not like pretend worship, but we actually worshipped God together. Katie was a willing instrument to present the Gospel to us. She was terrified, but still chosen by God to do a job. She also joins a long list of youth who responded to God's call at a young age. David was about her age when he slayed Goliath. Mary was about her age when the Holy Spirit visited her. Samuel was about her age when he spoke to God and was given his marching orders. Jesus was her age when he was in the temple listening and learning and asking questions of the teachers.

We are reminded in all of this that at some point Jesus tells us that we must become like children if we are to understand the kingdom of God. If we are to be the instruments of God, then we must have a faith and a trust in God as children have in their parents. They don't understand all that is being asked of them, but they do it. The faith of a child.

Today we are going to see two adults who are called by God, whom God actually visits and speaks to them in person and they are not so sure that they want to do God's commands. Jonah and Ananias, one more unwilling than the other, but both question God and God's wisdom as He gives them commands to carry out. You know, God's voice comes directly to us at times, but we often choose to follow other voices around us because they are more powerful, they seem to make more sense, they even serve our purposes and our agendas more than what God might be telling us. We are often unwilling instruments because of the voices around us leading us in the opposite direction as the voice of God.

Today, hopefully, we will train to be willing instruments. Let's see how.

READ SCRIPTURE

So let's start back in our first reading and I do feel a little bad about Jonah because he tends to be one of my favorite punching bags. But the only reason he is, much like Peter in the New Testament, is because I know I can relate to him and I'm guessing you can as well. Remember the story, he receives an audible call from God to evangelize the enemies of the Israelites. He purposely runs the other way until God through a whale gets him ultimately, unwillingly, to do his original task and carry out his original call of evangelizing the Ninevites, the enemies of the Israelites. In protest he does it and then we pick up the Scripture where we read that the Ninevites repent and God also repents and decides not to destroy this nation that Jonah would have really wished God would have destroyed.

In our Scripture we read Jonah telling God: What? You see, this is why I didn't want to come here because I knew that you would save them. His exact words are: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." How dare you be like that? Jonah wasn't afraid to go to the Ninevites because they might hurt him, that would have been better, then they wouldn't have heard the Gospel message. The good news that God loved them. He was afraid that God's true nature would be revealed and that he would show mercy and his legacy would have been that prophet who saved the Ninevites so they could come back and raid our towns again.

Listen to this and try to make sense of this. Jonah is angry because of the grace of God. He has received that same grace. He isn't angry that the Ninevites have something that he doesn't have, no, he is angry that they have the same thing that he has. Think of the parable of the workers and how those workers who worked the whole day got a fair wage, but were angry because those who only worked one hour got the same wage. Unwilling instruments often are unwilling because the world tells them that the way God works is not fair.

Are we angry when people get God's grace and goodness. Are we angry when people get what we don't think they deserve. Think of professional athletes. Who is angry because of how much they get paid? Why are you angry about that? When we are I think we are a lot like Jonah. The voices of those around us, whom we choose to listen to, influence us more than the voice of God, so we become bitter and angry because of our lot in life and we get angry at people who haven't done anything to us, but just make a lot of money because the market allows it. What a waste of time for us to get angry at something like that.

Our sense of fairness or even our sense of outrage will drown out God's grace and God's unfailing unconditional love that he has for us because we are so angry about what is happening around us. Jonah absolutely was an unwilling instrument who just wanted to die because people who didn't deserve God's grace received it.

To a lesser degree Ananias was also an unwilling instrument. Did you hear it when we read the Scripture? Remember where we are in this Scripture. Paul was on the way to Damascus, a hub of covert illicit Christian activity and he had letters from the chief priests to be able to go into houses and arrest Christians. He had the full force of the law at his side. But before he arrived Jesus spoke to him and said no, stop. I love you and I want you to love me. In this Scripture we read that Saul, who was blinded by his experience with God, has been in prayer and fasting from the day of his conversion which we read about before Palm Sunday, to today, to this Scripture. We don't know how many days have passed since his conversion and when Ananias gets visited by the Lord.

God appears to Ananias and calls out his name and Ananias responds by saying: Here I am Lord. What a difference from when he appeared to Saul and he responds by saying: who are you? So right away you know that Ananias was much more open to the will of God, even as in vs. 10 we see him described as a disciple. Ananias is part of a long line of people in the Bible to whom God revealed himself and answered, here I am Lord, your instrument. So far, so good. You should also know that at this point probably every Christian in Damascus knew not only that Saul was on his way, but what happened to him on the road to Damascus. They were terrified, they knew their days were numbered, and this health condition that Saul was suffering may have been an answer to prayer.

When God gives Ananias his call he goes into such detail as giving the street name and the name of the house and the location of where he was to go and what he was to do. It reminds me of the disciples as they are sent to get a donkey for Jesus. The details God gives Ananias are unique. Go to this man named Saul and lay your hands on him so that he can regain his sight. We see this command in vs.11 and 12. It is interesting that God speaks more to Ananias than he does to Saul. But Ananias also answers in two full verses and in this answer you can sense not just a sense of reticence, but a terror of, God are you sure? It is his attempt at objecting to the command that was given. Lord, he has done evil to your saints in Jerusalem. He was sent here to bind us and to send us to prison. Are you sure?

He doesn't say no, but he also doesn't say here I am a handmaiden of the Lord, all things are possible with God. Are you sure? He was obviously unwilling to do the task at this point. Ananias had to be convinced, persuaded to do his job. Not only was Saul converted on the road to Damascus, but in these verses Ananias also has to experience his conversion experience to turn him from an unwilling, to a willing instrument.

That term instrument which we find in vs.15, which is the key verse in this Scripture, is the same term used for vessel, or jar. This is important because it makes clear that what Saul was, is what Ananias ought to be. Just a vessel, an instrument carrying out God's purposes. Conversion here moves us from self-dependence and self-confidence to child like dependence on the Word of the Lord. Conversion and becoming an instrument has to do with someone being approached by God and being changed in the process of that encounter. Conversion is something which Christ does, not what we do. Remember what Jesus told his disciples when he spoke to them in the last days of his life: John 15:16 – You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Jonah and Ananias, both unwilling instrument, but what they have in common, is that God still used them nonetheless. Jonah ended up bitter, but even as unwilling, even to the point of death, that he was, God used him to save a nation. Ananias shows us how an unwilling instrument can go from being unwilling, to turning an enemy into a brother. Look at vs.17 when he lays his hands on him he calls him, brother Saul. He didn't have to do that, but he totally bought into what God had told him and he was now totally in, an instrument ready to do whatever God who had called him asked him to do.

We are called to be God's instruments and to seek out the kingdom of God. The kingdom will come, but how much of a role we will play is not up to us, it is up to the God who call us. He has called us, now let's respond as willing instruments. Amen.