

# Thy will be done - biblical interpretation - Brief Article

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10;

1 Corinthians 7:29-31;

Mark 1:14-20

I REMEMBER the day I received my call--follow me and I will make you fish for people. In my case it was a call to ordained ministry. Although my call was more like a slow culmination of events and experiences, there was one dramatic moment in my senior year in high school. It was 1973, just three years after my denomination officially allowed the ordination of women. At the time, I knew nothing of this historical moment. Since the second grade I had informed those who asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" that I wanted to be a doctor. But it turned out not to be my calling. I tested my professional desire by volunteering for several years as a "candy striper" in our local hospital, and discovered that I became light-headed at the sight of anything sharp and medical. I figured medical school would be rough.

My senior year in high school I, the pre-premed student, was dutifully enrolled in biology. We were on the verge of dissecting cats, an assignment for which I had no stomach or desire.

It was then that I heard of a woman who was enrolled as a student at the Lutheran seminary in my hometown--the first woman ever in the master of divinity program in that school. This was all I needed. I put down my scalpel, quit the class and turned my face toward Jerusalem.

It was simultaneously a freeing and frightening moment. I was absolutely convinced of my call and yet absolutely unsure how I would accomplish this new mission. I wondered if the stork had dropped the baby off at the wrong house. The call was there, but it seemed to me the gifts were not. I was terribly shy--how could I possibly preach a sermon in front of people! I had only minimal social skills--how could I possibly manage the dynamics of a congregation? I didn't

know how any of this could work to any good. Every night in college as a religion major, I prayed to God to just give me a sign if I were on the wrong path and I would gladly resign my call. Years later, through times of success and times of despair, I have yet to hear the summons to retreat. What my experience confirms for me is precisely what the scriptures proclaim: when God calls, it is our joyful task to follow. And it is God's agenda that wins.

Those first fisher disciples left more than their nets by the seashore. The nets were only a symbol for all that must be abandoned in order to follow Christ. Popular psychology counsels the heavy-laden to get rid of their excess baggage. The old spiritual sang it: I'm gonna lay down my burden down by the riverside. Those called to follow litter the riverside and the "fontside" with precisely the kind of stuff Jonah had difficulty giving up. We may be impressed with the valuables Simon and Andrew laid down to follow Jesus--families, homes and jobs--these proved to be mere trinkets compared with what they were ultimately called to lay down at the foot of the cross. The punchline of the Jonah comedy prepares the way. Jonah was a call resister and for good reason: he objected to God's mercy. In a sermon on God's mercy, Isaiah once proclaimed of God, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."

In the Jonah drama on the character of God, Jonah clearly hears the call of the Lord and even more clearly knows that he will not, cannot, follow. It's not because he's too busy or because he has obligations he cannot imagine leaving. He intentionally sails away because he does not agree with God's ways and God's agenda. Jonah sees others wallowing in the mud of their disobedience, evil and immorality and believes with all his soul that they should be pelted with fire and brimstone hurled from the hand of God. It's what they deserve. The evil should be punished and the righteous rewarded. Bad things should happen to bad people and good things should happen to good people. Everybody Jonah had ever lived with, worked with or had lunch with seemed to see the world in the same way--everybody, that is, except the God of the universe. Jonah was an honest man. Although mercy disgusted him, he knew his ways were not God's ways. If the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah was sure God would embrace them.

When we decide to follow, we are called to lay down some of our most valuable possessions: our understanding of the world, our view of right and wrong, our assumptions about whom God favors and whom God despises, our ways and our thoughts. The Jonah drama ends incompletely yet compassionately as God consoles the pouting Jonah like a mother explaining the justice of the world to an angry three-year-old.

The disciples of Jesus discovered that fishing nets were only the first things they would be called to leave behind for the gospel's sake. As they traveled and camped around Galilee, they discarded beliefs about the character and will of God. They cast off their assumptions about God's mercy, love and justice. Judas, of course, clung to his religious-political beliefs until they became a noose around his neck. None of the others were perfect disciples either. Each had his "Jonah moments" of resisting the call and questioning God's agenda.