

Sermon Title: **“Are You Following?”**

Bible: **Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark 1:14-20**

When: on Sunday, January 21, 2024

Where: about 20 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. They Left Their Nets and Families?**

Today’s Gospel reading of Mark can be very challenging. When Jesus called the first disciples, they left their nets and followed Jesus. What does this mean? When Jesus called, they left their family and followed Jesus. What does this mean? When Jesus calls us, do we need to give up our jobs and our families? What do you think? To be the disciples of Jesus Christ, do we need to give up our jobs and our families?

I used to think that following Jesus Christ required giving up our jobs and our families. That’s because it was true for those Christians in the early church and those early Christians in Korea. There were several persecutions against Christians. To be Christian itself meant risking their lives, their jobs, and sometimes their families. Because they were Christians, they were not welcomed, they lost their jobs, and they were put out of their communities, and their families. And they lost their lives. But how about us? To follow Jesus Christ, do we need to give up our jobs and our families?

I carefully read the Bible again, not only today’s passage, but also other parts. This is from

the Gospel of John 21. After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples. At that time, the disciples were fishing. When Jesus saw them fishing, what did Jesus say to them? Was Jesus disappointed in their fishing? What Jesus did was to help them to catch many fish. What Jesus said to them was, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." And Jesus also asked them to bring some of the fish that they had caught, to come, and to have breakfast! Jesus took the bread and did the same with the fish. How do you read this story? Did the disciples need to give up fishing? Did Jesus dislike their profession of fishing?

How about families? Did the disciples need to give up their families? There are many stories of Jesus healing. And one of them is that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law. Simon is Peter, and as we read that he had a mother-in-law, it tells us that Peter was married. Yeah, he had his family. When Peter's mother-in-law was sick, Jesus healed her. And this healing story of Peter's mother-in-law was recorded in three Gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Did the disciples need to leave and give up their families? Even Jesus was thinking of his mother. One of his last seven words on the cross was "Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother."

I know that there are still situations in which to follow Jesus means to take a risk. But I do not think that to follow Jesus means to give up our jobs and our families, at least for those of us who live in the United States and in the 21st century. You do not need to give up your jobs. So, please make as much money as you can! Save all you can and give all you can. If you are

in school, please learn and explore what you like and what you want to do. I know that some of you are retired. Please enjoy your retirement! You have worked a lot! You do not need to come back to work. You deserve to enjoy your retired lives. You do not need to give up your families. Actually, please take care of your families, as Jesus took care of his mother.

## **2. Follow Jesus?**

Then, what does it mean to follow Jesus? To me, to follow Jesus means to make time and room for Jesus. Our families are important, but where do you spend most of your time? Work. If you are full-time, you work about 8 hours a day or 40 hours per week. Do you spend more time with your families, more than 40 hours per week? Then, which one is more important, work or family? I love my wife. Then do I need to spend 24 hours a day with my wife? No. What I practice is to have one meal a day together. This one meal does not take 8 hours. Usually, it takes about one hour. But this one hour meal is very ordinary and very precious.

When your children or grandchildren have a Christmas presentation or graduation ceremony, don't you change your working hours and try to be there? You do not need to quit your jobs, right? You just need to change the schedule and make time, right? You do not need to give up your jobs, but your presence shows that your children and grandchildren are more important!

Do you make time and room for Jesus? You do not need to come to church every day and every hour. I know that even when you are retired, your lives can be busier. But do you make

time and room for Jesus? When Jesus called the first disciples, there was neither the smartphone nor email. I believe that there were no watches yet. So, when Jesus called the disciples, they needed to follow Jesus immediately. Otherwise, they could miss the opportunities to follow Jesus. But we are different. According to the schedule of our jobs, families, and lives, we can set up time and room for Jesus. We can have time for daily devotions, prayer time, or small groups. We can set aside time for the Sunday Worship Service. You do not need to give up all of your time, but how about setting up a time for Jesus, especially during Lent? Lent will begin on Ash Wednesday, which is Valentine's Day.

### **3. Constructive & Destructive Theologies**

In terms of making room for God, I would like to introduce the concept of constructive or destructive theologies. I believe that we are all theologians, because we all have our own perspectives of how to look at and understand God. My theology, my understanding of God, is different from yours. And my twenties' understanding of God can be different from my thirties'. We might think that our understanding of God needs to be fixed, perfect, absolute, or complete. But our understanding of God should always be under construction. So, please make room for your understanding of God. This might mean that your faith could be shaken, because of questions, doubts, or misunderstanding. But this is the process of our ongoing understanding of God by destruction and construction.

Today's first reading from Jonah started with "the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." At first, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. So, Jonah ran away from God. God sent

the storm to Jonah. Jonah was thrown into the sea. That time, God provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah stayed safely in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. There, he prayed with thanksgiving to God, and today's scripture begins there. As we read, thanks to Jonah's message, the people of Nineveh turned from their evil ways, and God changed God's mind about their punishment. What a beautiful story! Then, Jonah must be happy about this ending, right? Let us read more after today's passage.

This comes right after today's passage of Jonah. Jonah 4:1-5 says, "1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city."

Was Jonah happy or angry? He was angry enough even to die, because God had too much grace and mercy. Jonah could not accept this God. According to Jonah's theology, God should not forgive the wicked people, and God should punish them! The reason why Jonah refused to go to them at the beginning was not because he was reluctant to speak about God's punishment, but because he worried about God having too much steadfast love. Where was God's justice? Is our Lord really a just God? And the book of Jonah ends with God's

response to Jonah's anger.

#### **4. What Are You Following?**

Does your theology have time and room for destruction and construction? We are all theologians. Our theologies are different, unique, and meaningful. But, our theologies are neither absolute nor completed. Our theologies should be in construction all the time. In our faith journey, what are we following? Are we following our theologies? Or are we following God, who is a living one? Do we have rooms and times for God's revelation, God's mystery, or God's too abundant grace and mercy?

When the first disciples followed Jesus, they could not understand all of Jesus' teachings, healings, miracles, actions, plans, or even his way to the cross. Sometimes, they misunderstood. They made mistakes. They were tired and exhausted. They were not ready. They were afraid. They ran away. They denied. They doubted. But they followed Jesus, when Jesus called them. Is Jesus calling you? And are you following Jesus? Do you have time and room for Jesus?

#### **Closing Prayer**

O Lord, our living God, you are calling us as your children and as your disciples. When you call us, please lead us to follow you. Please help us to set aside time and room for your love and grace. With your power, wisdom, and love, we want to live today and tomorrow. In Jesus' name. Amen.