

Sunday, January 22, 2012: Jonah 3:1–5, 10; Mark 1:14–20

Simon and Andrew *immediately* left their nets and followed. If only we could respond so quickly.

by [Cynthia D. Weems](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

During Bible study one day, a lifelong member of our congregation shared a story from his boyhood. William had grown up just north of downtown Miami and was a teenager when he began taking the bus down to the church with his brother to attend Thursday's children's choir rehearsal. Soon he began to notice others who were riding with him. When he hopped on the bus downtown and began to journey north back home, female domestic workers and male day laborers would begin to fill the bus. He noticed that many of these women and men had to stand during the entire ride because they were people of color and therefore restricted to the rear of the bus, where all of the seats were quickly taken.

Troubled by the situation, William decided to do something. Although he was white and could sit at the front, he decided that he would go to the back of the bus and take one of the seats in the section reserved for people of color. When there were no more seats in that section, William would stand and give his to the next woman of color who got on the bus.

Many years later this man is a leader in nurturing a racially and economically diverse congregation. I believe he must have been paying attention in Sunday school when he heard stories like the one in Mark in which Jesus calls the disciples. "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." Where did they go? To places like the rear of the bus.

We read the gospel stories describing the call of the disciples and wonder many things: Did it really happen this quickly? Were the fishermen that taken with Jesus, or were they so dissatisfied with fishing that they left in a rush to follow? Did neither father nor mother make a fuss about their departure?

Perhaps these questions come from our own experiences of discipleship. We often drag our feet, weigh pros and cons and consider the implications for family and other commitments. Then there are our nets—they're so full of things we find difficult to leave behind that we attempt to take them along, sure that we'll need some of that old baggage on our new journey with Jesus.

But we're told that Simon and Andrew *immediately* left their nets and followed. If only we could respond so quickly.

Perhaps the story of Jonah more closely resembles our own journeys. The Lord cries out and we flee. We try to escape the demands of discipleship that challenge us to name injustice and call for repentance. Like Jonah, we run from the city or workplace or political structure that is precisely where God is calling us to be and work. Like Jonah, we discover that we cannot escape the presence of God or of God's call on our lives. If we discern well, in spite of the detours along the way, we return as Jonah did to God's original vision for us and see God's faithfulness at work.

The congregation I serve recently celebrated 115 years of ministry. For many years there were two Methodist congregations just blocks apart in downtown Miami, a northern and a southern church. Even after those divisions were finally dissolved in 1939, both congregations continued to exist separately, with only occasional talk about

merging. Then in 1965, a 14-year-old who had escaped from reform school in New York set fire to the sanctuary of one of the churches. The fire happened on a Saturday night, and on Sunday morning the pastor scribbled a big sign on what remained of the front door, "Burned out but fired up! Service as usual." That morning the two congregations worshiped together in the undamaged building.

Here's where William comes in. No one is surprised that the young man who gave up his seat on the bus would become instrumental in the merger of these two congregations with vastly different identities. The new congregation would become multiracial and known for its ministries with the homeless. It would remain in the city when other churches had left. Leaders like William would draw strength from the stories echoing through their lives: stories of detours through the mouths of big fish and of disciples dropping nets to follow. The words of Jesus continue to ring true, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

If we pay attention to the details of our scriptural heritage, we'll learn how to shape our lives. We'll see Jonah rushing away from the Lord to Tarshish. We'll read again about those disciples who jumped up and followed Jesus. Yes, we are still both the follower who drags her feet and the young man or the congregation that is "fired up" about what God has in store. But in the midst of challenge and opportunity, we dare to discern well and trust in God's faithfulness.