

Rev. Kate LeFranc

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## **“Follow Me”**

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

In 2010, a young guy named Brandon Stanton was laid off from his job in finance, and decided to devote himself to his new hobby as an amateur photographer. He moved to New York, and set out on a project of documenting the amazing breadth of people who make up New York City – sort of a visual census, as it were. And then he started having deeper conversations with his subjects, and began posting quotes and snippets from the interviews with their photos on his blog, called Humans of New York.

It’s an amazing collection of people and of stories, and I always love the opportunity to get these windows into the lives of ordinary people, each of whom is beautiful and unique in their own ways.

This week Brandon posted a photo of an 8th grader he met named Vidal. He told Brandon about his principal, Ms. Lopez, and what a difference she had made in his life by helping him to stay in school and telling him and his classmates that they mattered. So Brandon set off to find her: Nadia Lopez, founder and principal of Mott Hall Bridges Academy in Brownsville, Brooklyn, the neighborhood with the highest crime rate in NYC.

Ms. Lopez spoke about her vision for the school, in the midst of a neighborhood that doesn’t expect much from its children, where her students would be encouraged and expected to succeed; where they would know that even if they lived in a housing project, that they come from a rich cultural heritage and that their success matters. As she said to her teachers, “these kids need you. Our girls don’t feel honored and respected. Our boys are being recruited into gangs. Your classrooms may be the one place they feel safe and respected. If we give up, there is nobody else.”

And so together with Ms. Lopez and the assistant principal, Brandon launched a fundraiser to support the Mott Hall programming. The first project was a class trip for all incoming 6th graders up to Harvard University, to give these kids a glimpse of the world beyond NYC, and to let them know that “they can go anywhere.” After the fundraiser blew past \$300,000 within the first day – enough to make the trip a permanent part of the curriculum – they identified another need: safe and productive summer programming, for these kids who can’t afford other opportunities.

At this point, over \$600,000 has been contributed from almost 22,000 people, all because of one boy who spoke up, one man who listened, and one woman who has followed her dream to change the lives of the students who walk through her doors.

[<https://life.indiegogo.com/fundraisers/let-s-send-kids-to-harvard>]

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Our scripture texts today are also stories of people who were called, or challenged, and followed. In Mark it sounds like a straightforward story – Jesus shows up back in Galilee and issues a call, or an invitation really, to follow him. And probably there was a little more to it than we get in Mark’s version – I know if I were Simon I would at least have asked what I was getting myself into – but however it happens, Simon and Andrew and James and John leave their nets and their work and set off to follow Jesus.

In Jonah, the backstory is a little more complicated. It’s a fantastic story, though, of a reluctant prophet. Jonah has heard the call of God – heard God’s voice loud and clear, and all he knows is he does not want to listen. God tells Jonah to go and prophesy to Ninevah, of all places, the capital city of the Assyrians, enemies and oppressors of the Hebrew people. Why would he want to speak God’s word to *them*, of all people?

So he runs as fast as he can in the other direction, and hops the first boat to Tarshish, trying to outrun God’s call. And then God sends a storm. The sailors are panicking, saying prayers to their gods, pretty sure they’re all going to die, but then eventually Jonah figures out what’s going on and allows them to throw him overboard to save the ship. Whereupon, he is quickly rescued from the stormy sea – by being swallowed by a whale. Finally, grudgingly, he prays to God to save him, and so God commands the fish to vomit him out back on land.

And that’s where our reading for today picks up: *again* the word of the Lord comes to Jonah, but this time Jonah picks himself up, brushes off the whale vomit, and reluctantly sets off for Ninevah, where he preaches what’s possibly the shortest and least inspiring sermon in history. “In forty days, Ninevah will be overthrown!”

But then, somehow, all of Ninevah repents, God doesn’t destroy them as promised, and so Jonah goes off into the desert to sulk. “I *knew* you were a merciful God!”

And I love this story, because it feels so very human. While apparently for the Ninevites it was an easy decision to change their course, more often it seems like we respond to God’s calls like Jonah does; if not physically running away then we do it by digging in our heels and refusing to go, making excuses sometimes to cover for our fears or insecurities, or maybe we don’t *want* to change the world because we like things pretty well the way they are.

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There are countless different ways to be called, and paths to be called to follow. Like Simon and Andrew, maybe we can jump up with enthusiasm to a new project; or maybe like Jonah we see where God is leading and dig in our heels because no *way* are we going *there*. Maybe like James and John we’d be leaving a successful business behind, or maybe like photographer Brandon Stanton, we lost a job already and are seeking out a new path with an uncertain future. Maybe like principal Nadia Lopez we see a need in our community and start following what feels like a crazy dream to meet that need. Or maybe like Vidal, the boy whose photo first went viral, we’ve been inspired by a mentor to follow a dream of our own.

All of us are here because there's something that draws us here. And whether that's tradition or community or spiritual growth or habit or a commitment to the choir or whatever else it may be, there is something of God in that, and there is some way in which you are being called to follow. God has already called you out, and there are new possibilities in store for you, for each one of us, no matter where you are in life.

Maybe your callings are right here in this church, in our communities and families, maybe they're in Newark and Elkton or over in Wilmington, or maybe you're just setting off somewhere new, off to college or almost done with college and it feels like the whole world is open to you. Wherever you are in your journey, take some time to listen for God. Listen for Jesus showing up at your workplace or your home or your school and planting some new idea in your head.

And see what happens, just this once, if you let yourself dream a little. If you let your mind wander and think, well, what if...? Why couldn't I? Why couldn't we?

Because God has some wonderful plans for us. Let us open our ears and hear where Jesus might be calling *us* to follow.