A few weeks ago, I asked you what the funniest movie was that you had ever seen. I told you about “The End” with Burt Reynolds and Dom Deluise. Some of you came up to me afterwards to argue for Young Frankenstein or Blazing Saddles or A Fish Called Wanda or Eddie Murphy fans wanted Trading Places, but I was surprised that no one argued for the movie that was second on my list, and depending on my mood, one that I could watch over and over again is Monty Python and the Holy Grail. One of the best bits in this British farce is that when the knights of the round table get involved in a fight and start to lose, they all look at each other, and instead of calling “retreat,” they shout to one another, “run away, run away!”

Run away. Last week we talked about vocation. We said that all of us are called to be disciples, that we are all called to follow Jesus. What we didn't talk about last week was our response. What did you do when God called to you? Where you like Peter and Andrew, James and John? Did you leave whatever you were doing and begin to do what God was asking? Or did you do something else? Did you run away?

We read today from the book of Jonah, but we didn't read the whole thing. We only read the nice part. But Jonah is probably the only true comedy in the Bible. The book tells the story of a man named Jonah, son of Amattai, an Israelite who is told by God to go to Nineveh tell them how wicked they have been and that God is judging them harshly. That's our first clue that this is a satire or a parable or just a straight out comedy. A Jewish prophet is supposed to go to Nineveh. An American prophet is supposed to go to Bagdad or to Moscow or to Pyongyang. Or a North Korean prophet is to go to Tokyo or to Washington. Or a prophet from Greece is sent to Turkey. There are all kinds of modern variation of the idea of a prophet being sent to warn his nation's enemies.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, one of the cruelest empires of ancient times. It
was the Assyrians who had conquered the nation of Israel in the eighth century BC. But they don't just conquer with their military, they would take the people out of their homeland and replant them somewhere else, bringing in another group of people to take over Israel. This was supposed to keep the people from rebelling against the Assyrians. Bring in a new group of people who would live in houses that weren't theirs, plant fields that their parents hadn't known, work in shops that belonged to someone else, and be far away from your homeland. Just the same, when the Assyrians conquered the northern tribes of Israel, they took them away and planted them in some other far away country. That's the origin of the legendary ten lost tribes of Israel. The Assyrians did not conquer the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who continued to live around Jerusalem. But then to call Jonah, "come, be a prophet to Nineveh, help me save the Assyrians," would be shocking to a Jewish prophet.

So what does Jonah do? Run away! Nineveh is to the east of where he is, so Jonah takes a ship to go to Tarshish, west, the opposite direction. But as soon as the ship heads out onto the open sea, they begin to encounter difficulty. Storms, wind and waves begin to pummel the ship. Something must be wrong, the sailors think. God must be against them for some reason. So they cast lots to see which one of them God was angry with, and of course the short straw fell on Jonah. What had he done? Why was God so mad at him, they asked? He admitted that he was running away from God and that to save the ship they would have to throw him overboard. So they do and the sea immediately calms down. But what about poor Jonah? Never let it be said that God doesn't provide, so the story tells us that God provided a great fish to come and swallow Jonah, so he finds himself in the belly of a fish. Good time to pray. The story says that he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Then he decided to pray. I would think so.

So he prays to God for deliverance, and he says he remembers that God has been good to him. Good time to remember that. Maybe he should have remembered that before he ran away. Then the scripture says that God spoke to the fish and so the fish went and vomited Jonah up on the beach. Not a surprise. You sort of have to feel sorry for the fish, stuck with this obstinate prophet in his stomach for three
days, it would make anyone feel sick to their stomach. Then comes the part of the story that we read, that God spoke to Jonah a second time and this time Jonah went and did what God asked. He went to those rotten, no good, evil Ninevites and told them that unless they repented and shaped up, that God was going to destroy them. And so they did. They listened. And they believed Jonah. And they repented in sackcloth and ashes. And so God changed his mind and did not destroy them.

And so Jonah, being the wonderful prophet that he was, rejoiced and threw a big party for the Ninevites that God had been so merciful to them, right. No. Jonah had gone outside the city to wait for the fireworks. He was sure that God was going to destroy these evil people and since he had gone to so much trouble to come and tell them about it, the least he could get out of it was a front row seat for the destruction of Israel’s enemy. But no. God has to be merciful. And so he prays again to the Lord and says, “See, I knew it! This is why I ran away in the first place, because I knew you were so merciful and gracious and slow to get angry that something like this might happen. No fireworks, no destruction, no good!” And so he went and sat down in the desert outside the city. And God appointed a bush to grow up and give Jonah shade from the heat of the sun, and that made Jonah happy. Then that night God made a worm attach the bush so that it wilted and died and the next day the sun was so hot and Jonah was so faint and angry about the death of the bush that he prayed that he might die. And so God spoke to him again and said, Are you right to be angry about the bush? And Jonah said, Yes, angry enough to die. And God said, Jonah, you’re an idiot. You’re upset about a bush that grew in a day and wilted in a night, but you’re not really concerned about a huge city and all the people in it?

The story of Jonah shows that sometimes comedy can teach us lessons where we might not want to hear them. That movie I told you about, The End, is about the value and preciousness of life, no matter how much time we have. Blazing Saddles is all about race relations. Trading Places, another of my favorites is about the haves and have nots in the economics of our society. Comedy teaches lessons. Then what does Jonah teach us? It taught the Israelites that they were not the only ones that God cared about. The first lesson of Jonah is that God is the God of all people. Including the Ninevites.
Including the Assyrians. Including the Russians. Including the North Koreans. Including ISIS. Even if they do not recognize him, God is the God of all. Including the Democrats, including the Republicans, including the liberals, including the conservatives, including all the people you disagree with. God is their God too. And God loves them. The second lesson of Jonah is that God is merciful, God is ready to forgive, to restore, to be in loving relationship with us even when we have made mistakes, even when we have rebelled against him, even when we have treated each other badly. God is merciful, and I don’t know about you, but I can’t help but say, “Thank God.”

The other thing that Jonah teaches us has to do with our call. We said that all of us are called. Jesus comes to each of us, maybe in a different way, but he comes to each of us and says, “Follow me.” And maybe we drop our nets and follow him. And maybe we run away. But the amazing thing to me about the book of Jonah is the first verse of chapter 3 that we read today. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” A second time. He didn’t call Jonah only once. Even after Jonah had run away, he called to him again. Was the call to Peter and Andrew the first time they had seen Jesus? We don’t know. It seems like it from the story, but maybe they had dinner the night before and talked about all this and what it would mean and were they really ready. And so when he came by the next day, they had thought it all out. Or maybe Jesus had been coming by for a week, calling to them each day and finally this day they were ready to follow. Jesus doesn’t call us to follow him just once. If we don’t come with him, he’ll be back. And Jesus doesn’t call us to follow just once even when we do. He keeps calling us after we’ve fallen by the wayside. After we’ve said we’ve had enough. After we’ve said, I’ve followed long enough, now it’s someone else’s turn. Even when we’ve run away for a while because we’re tired, or angry, or scared. Jesus is there. Each day. Today. And says, “Follow me.”