

4-29-2007

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Recommended Citation

Bahls, Steven C.. "Lessons From Jonah: "When Your Feet and Heart Say No!"" (2007). *Speeches and Statements*.
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Lessons From Jonah | Augustana College

"When Your Feet and Heart Say No!"

Sermon for Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, April 29, 2007

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

Let me begin by offering my thanks for this kind invitation to be with you today. This is a special time at Our Saviour's Lutheran, as you celebrate your 50th year in ministry as a congregation. Three years from now, Augustana College will celebrate its 150th anniversary, and so I confess one reason I was looking forward to being with you this weekend was to gather ideas on how to celebrate such a remarkable milestone.

I was very pleased when Pastor Grevlos informed me that over the past weeks you have been recapping the great stories of faith - the story of Caleb and Joshua and the Story of Ruth last week. Today's worship theme has to do with Jonah. I find this to be one of the most intriguing stories in all of scripture, in that it's one we all learn as children, and yet the story poses questions about faithful living which can challenge us no matter what our age.

The story of Jonah has much to say to all of us, and particularly young adults on college campuses. I would like to spend a few moments sharing with you some of the things Jonah might teach my colleagues and me as we pursue our mission of giving our students a transformative education. And then I'll ask more generally what Jonah might have to say to all of us.

The first thing Jonah teaches us is vocation. And while the calling Jonah receives from God is about as clear and concise as can be - "Go to Nineveh and cry out against it" - most of us do not receive such plain and forthright instruction concerning our vocation.

At Augustana College, we take vocation very seriously. We work deliberately with our students to help them discover their vocation or calling in life. Sometimes students refer to this as finding their groove in life. We do so by asking students to consider **who** they are, before they consider **what** they want to do with their lives. We try to help them awaken their passions, sharpen their skills, develop their values and think about the most important things in life. We ask them to turn the crystal. And we ask them to get outside of their comfort zones.

God certainly wasn't taking into account such things as "comfort" or "job satisfaction" when telling Jonah to go to Nineveh. It was, in fact, the last place Jonah wanted to go. In resisting God's call, Jonah gives us perhaps the most extreme example in all of scripture of the inevitability of vocation. And this brings us to a second lesson we might glean from the Book of Jonah: a calling is a very powerful thing, and we do well to respect it.

At Augustana, I have the great privilege of meeting young people before they discern their vocation. My favorite

time at Augustana is our opening convocation each fall. There are nearly 700 young people in each entering class, and as I look over the students and their parents in Augustana's Centennial Hall, I am humbled by the responsibility to do my part to guide a college that helps almost all of these students start to discern their calling. There in the audience are future surgeons who have never been in an operating room, pastors who have never given a sermon, social workers who have never spent time with poor families, leaders of international non-governmental organizations who have never been abroad and scientists who have not yet conducted an experiment on their own.

What makes this such a special privilege for those of us who work at Augustana is that most of these people don't realize who they are to become when they arrive at the college. Indeed, some are unsure even when they graduate, and yet it is no less important for those who feel uncertain about their path to be equipped with the tools of discernment they will use throughout their lives. At Augustana, we challenge our students to get out of their comfort zones, to look at the world from different angles. Doing so transforms lives.

Consider Elizabeth Lowenthal Hafkin, a 1995 graduate of the College. Listen to what she recently wrote about her job opportunities upon graduation from medical school. She tells about how she decided to reject the work of a traditional doctor and go to Africa to care for HIV-infected children. Listen to her words:

The contract for the new job that I planned to take in Philadelphia arrived. Feeling unable to sign it just yet, I left it on the table, among my many journals and articles on International Health and Pediatric AIDS. Ours was to become a different kind of sacrifice - one that feels more like an honor and a privilege - fighting on the front-lines of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. I provide care for the children while Jeffrey [Elizabeth's husband] cares for their parents. With appropriate use of modern antiretroviral therapies, we see people transformed from the brink of death to become healthy, happy and productive. My years at Augustana provided me with a solid foundation that allowed me to succeed in medical school and in my career as a pediatrician As a rare Jewish student at traditionally-Christian Augustana, I deepened my faith through discussions with others. In a world that so often divides well-intentioned individuals based on differing beliefs, I learned that there is truth in the unity of good works and hope for a better world.

Her brain told her feet to play it safe - take the traditional job in Philadelphia. Her heart told her feet otherwise. Get going, her heart said, take a risk - follow your vocational calling.

Another example which comes to mind relates to a visit to campus a week ago by Dr. Timothy Johnson, the medical editor of ABC News. Some of you may know that Dr. Johnson is an Augustana graduate from the Class of 1959. What you may not know is that a professor's invitation to him helped shape the course of his life. Tim was a junior when the professor who led our Debate Team - and who recognized Tim's budding gifts as a communicator - asked him to consider joining Augustana's storied debate program. Tim thought about it and opted to take part in oratory. He then set about researching, writing and memorizing a speech about Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who had several years earlier won the Nobel Peace Prize for his medical work in Africa.

The passion Tim invested in his speech about Dr. Schweitzer may be one of the reasons that Tim wound up winning the National Collegiate Championship in oratory that year. After Augustana, Tim enrolled in seminary and set his course for a career in the ministry. But he carried his passion for Schweitzer with him, and within two

years of his graduation from seminary he had discerned a calling to enter medicine. Not long after becoming an M.D., he and his wife left for a medical mission to Indonesia.

Combining his gifts in medicine and communication, Dr. Timothy Johnson accepted the position of medical correspondent for a new program ABC launched in 1975 called *Good Morning, America*. Tim is the longest serving correspondent on the show.

In the case of Tim Johnson, I am tempted to wonder if there might have been some seminary professors who argued against Tim's decision to go to med school. And in the case of Elizabeth, might it have been tempting for classmates in medical schools to try to talk her out of going to Africa?

While I certainly don't think that anyone ran the risk of being swallowed by an enormous fish in either instance, I will say that in both cases, I'm glad these former students listened - then and since - to the callings they have discerned to be servant leaders in such significant ways.

This brings us to an important point. Our work to help students discern their vocations would be meaningless if we did not incorporate another lesson which the story of Jonah gives us. Namely, that while compassion is something each of us fervently seeks; we must be just as strident in offering it to others.

Consider Jonah. When he is trapped in the belly of the great fish, he calls upon God and even from the depths of the sea God hears him. God spares Jonah's life, and gives him a second chance. But remember what happens next: Jonah goes to Nineveh and warns the people of God's coming judgment. They repent, and God gives the people there a second chance. However, as we read in the New Revised Standard Version, "This was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." And as we read later in the story, Jonah suffers for this.

The Book of Jonah can be taken as a cautionary tale against seeing compassion as a one-way street. The kind of vocational reflection in which we engage our students is rooted in and informed by compassion, and the belief that what we are called to do must involve consideration of the needs of others, as well as the desires of ourselves.

Perhaps we can't give as dramatically as Elizabeth Hafkin or as publicly as Timothy Johnson. But we can give. And this church is an excellent vehicle through which we might do so. God calls us to give of ourselves. That is part of vocation and part of compassion. So when you are contacted concerning your participation in Our Savior's anniversary, stay out of the whale's belly - make your feet move even when it is easy to find reasons not to.

On behalf of my colleagues, I thank you for your partnership in higher education, and I wish you all the best in this time of celebration for your congregation.

Amen.



Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
		& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies