

A Short Sermon for a Change
A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 22nd, 2012
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Lord Jesus, teach us to deal with others as you have so graciously dealt with us. Help us to look upon strangers as beloved family in your name. We pray as those who, in our sin, were strangers to you and yet, in your love, have been brought into your family.

Becoming a preacher was probably the last thing on the mind of Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. Above all, Jonah *did not* want to be a preacher at Nineveh, capital city of Assyria, the nation that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah in submission for almost a century. And yet, God wants Jonah to be a preacher, a preacher to the people of Nineveh.

The voice of God comes to Jonah saying to him, “Go! Go to Ninevah! Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” God calls Jonah to go and preach judgment to a city that Jonah regards as the heart of the great, evil empire.

“Go, Jonah, go to the dark side.”

Talk about a bad first call to ministry, maybe even worse than western North Dakota, a place to which we seminarians used to dread being called. Jonah’s call is probably more like the heart of the Taliban in Afghanistan or Pakistan. I can think of some pretty tough congregations to walk into, but if I was asked to do what Jonah is called to do, I think I’d be looking for the first ship to Spain, too.

For Jonah even to walk into a place like Nineveh, not to mention preaching judgment against it, would seem to me rather suicidal. I can imagine that Jonah was simply afraid for his life to go to Nineveh; the story really doesn’t say, except that “Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa. . . found a ship going to Tarshish . . . away from the presence of the LORD.” Jonah literally runs for his life, away from the

presence of the Lord. Of course, the LORD finally catches up with Jonah and puts a stop to it with one of those famous Biblical storms at sea: “the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.” It reminds you of the stormy scene in the gospels when Jesus is resting easily in the stern of the boat while his disciples fear for their lives. The LORD just seems to have a way with waves.

So, “the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’” Jonah knows full well the horrible atrocities that the Assyrians have committed against his people and other nations. It’s one thing to be forgiving and merciful when it is your friend you are forgiving, but it is quite another thing to be forgiving and merciful when it is your worst enemy. Jonah later explains that he wouldn’t go to Nineveh because he was afraid that his sermons might actually have God’s intended effect. The Ninevites might actually change. Of course, if Ninevah changes, then Jonah will have to change his attitude toward Nineveh, and that kind of change is definitely not what he wants. Jonah does not want Nineveh to be spared.

Finally, when everybody is sick of Jonah, when the sailors have thrown him off the ship, when the big fish gets sick to its stomach on him, finally, Jonah slinks off to Ninevah, apparently disappointed that he didn’t drown at sea. There, standing in the suburbs, just a day’s walk into the great city, Jonah preaches the shortest, most pathetic, awful sermon that anybody’s ever heard. In Hebrew, it’s just five lousy words: “Forty–days–more–Nineveh–destroyed.” Period. No illustrations, no poems, no stories, no quotes,

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no on and on and on, just “Forty–days–more–Nineveh–destroyed.” But the response to the world’s shortest, most pathetic, awful sermon is the greatest story ever told. Here’s a short sermon for a big, big change. The people start fasting. They put on sackcloth. They roll in ashes. Even the king repents. Even the cattle and sheep repent. Even the dogs and cats repent. Everybody repents, everybody, that is, except Jonah who pouts because his silly sermon went so well.

It’s hard for a preacher to imagine that a sermon which changes 120,000 lives with just five words would be a source of such unhappiness for another preacher. I would think that Jonah should be ecstatic. No prophet ever in the entire Bible experienced such success. Jonah is the greatest preacher of all, but he gets so depressed about his success that he decides he’d rather be dead than live with a God who, as a nearby prophet says, is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

“I knew this would happen!” Jonah sulks, “I knew you were a God who was merciful and forgiving, a God who loves to change the world, even our worst enemies, even their dumb cows.” The text reads roughly, “it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned.” Yes, Jonah’s anger is the heart of the matter. He is angry at God for the very characteristics that Israel has always depended upon for its own salvation: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

God speaks to Jonah, tries to explain to him, but the story ends with Jonah going away mad. The joke seems to be on those who think that God’s love and grace are reserved only for certain people. It is a story that undergirds the Jewish *credo* that “God is One” and that the One God is the God also of those whom we exclude by our definitions of who is in and who is out with God.

You may know that the Book of Jonah is read in the Jewish calendar on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the Jewish people confess their sins against God and neighbor. Jonah teaches us that no one is beyond the reach of God’s hand. Jonah could not escape God—nor can we. God spared the people of Nineveh so that, regardless of our past lives, God’s mercy awaits us. We do not own God’s grace. God will be forgiving to whom God will be forgiving, merciful to whom God will be merciful.

Someone once told me that if I could not believe that God would save the worst of human beings, then I could not really believe that God could save me. One of St. Paul’s discoveries was that God is not only God of Israel but also God of the nations. And when Peter baptized Cornelius, he explained that through a vision from an angel of God, he now saw that God shows “no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

The church has never said that Christ died for the sins of the church. Christ died for the world: “For God so loved the world,” not just the church, not just Christians, not just American Christians. The world! Other nations, other cultures, other religions. No wonder that when the early Christians painted images of their faith in the catacombs they often depicted Jesus as Jonah, because Jesus, like Jonah, was the one who came preaching to God’s enemies, and through his preaching, transformed them into God’s family. “For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.”

Yet Jesus doesn’t stand at the edge of Nineveh. Jesus doesn’t flee Nineveh. Jesus comes right into the despicable place, right into the midst of an unclean people, right into a darkness swarming with demons, right into the terrors of unspeakable violence, right into my life and your life with all our confusions and failures, agonies and offenses. Jesus comes right into the Galilee of your life and mine. And there he seeks us, and there he finds us, and there he summons us: “Follow me.” “Follow me,” he says to these simple fishermen, “and I will make you fishers of humans.” And we, like Peter and Andrew, James and John, are transformed, made into new beings, who more and more bear the image of the God of love whom we see in Jesus.

Today is the day of salvation. God’s reign is on the move. We are summoned to move with it into Nineveh and into Galilee of the nations. So we die to the present form of this world and rise up into new lives in Christ. “The time is fulfilled, and the rule of God has come near.”

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