

Third Sunday After Epiphany

January 24, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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I love the book of Jonah; it is my favorite book of the minor prophets. You see, the book of Jonah was written to be a somewhat comedic satire that, at the time, was a critique of the northern kingdom of Israel. The story of Jonah is meant to point out Israel’s hypocrisy and challenge their understanding of God’s forgiving nature.

In this story the prophet Jonah also represents the personality of the northern kingdom of Israel. At the time, Israel was living in sin because its people were still living in patterns of abuse, injustice, and idolatry. Yet, even though Israel continued to live in these patterns of sin, they had the attitude that as long as they still believed in God, and as long as they continued to show unwavering and blind loyalty to their country, those two things would be enough to guarantee their salvation. This ideal also happened to be what Jonah proclaimed as a prophet.

So, when God calls Jonah to go and proclaim destruction to Nineveh unless they repent from their sinful ways, Jonah would rather flee to Tarshish. Why? Because Jonah doesn’t want to believe in a God who will forgive gentiles should they repent. In other words, Jonah wants to deny the true nature of God because the true nature of God loves those whom Jonah hates.



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How often have we seen this very thing play out in various Christian churches in today's world? I'm sure we all know of certain specific Christian churches or denominations who refuse to accept God's true loving nature because it would mean having to confront the fact that God loves those whom they want to hate.

So Jonah tries to flee to Tarshish, but God pursues him, and he is eventually (as we all know) swallowed by a giant fish where he is given three days to think about his choices.

When I was a child and attended Sunday school, the only part of Jonah's story that was ever taught to me and my fellow peers was his fleeing God's call and getting swallowed by (what we were told at the time) a giant whale. I also remember that the lesson we were supposed to learn from this story was that it is wrong to run away from God's call. Yet how many of us in the Christian church regularly run from God's call to take care of the poor, the outcast, the foreigner, and the enemy?

It wasn't until I was studying Jonah in Seminary that I learned there was so much more to the story than just Jonah being swallowed up by a whale. After Jonah finally agrees to go to Nineveh as God commanded him to do, this is where our scripture reading for today picks up. Jonah arrives at Nineveh, walks into the city and says, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." In other words, "if you don't change your ways in the next 40 days God's going to destroy you and your city!"

Now, what is quite a surprise here is that, as soon as Jonah speaks these words, the entire city of Nineveh, all of its people from the least to the greatest immediately begin repenting with fasting and putting on sackcloth. Now the people of Nineveh have no relationship whatsoever with God; they do not know God. Yet, when they hear the word of God proclaiming a future of death and destruction, they immediately begin to repent. It is interesting here that the threat of death and destruction creates faith in the gentiles of Nineveh.

This part of Jonah's story is sheer brilliance in its commentary on comparing the city of Nineveh with the northern kingdom of Israel. On the one hand you have Israel who chooses to continue living in patterns of sin, ignoring the prophets who bring God's word of warning of death and destruction. On the other hand, you have a city full of foreign gentiles, who have never known Israel's God, who are the enemy of Israel, immediately repent at God's



word of warning of death and destruction. And, of course to Jonah's displeasure and anger, God responds to Nineveh's repentance with forgiveness. Nineveh's repentance touches God's heart and fills God with compassion.

As I was studying the first reading and the gospel text for over the past week, I found something intriguing. What brought the people of Nineveh to faith in God was the threat of death and destruction. The sobering reality that patterns of sin can lead to death was enough to transform the hearts of these gentiles to a new way of life, a life grounded in following God's ways, the ways of compassion, mercy, grace, and service toward the other be they neighbor, stranger, or enemy.

Now what increased my intrigue with this part of Jonah's story was what Jesus said to Peter and Andrew when he called them to follow. Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Now, for the longest time I understood this saying of Jesus to mean that the disciples were going to catch people for Jesus. A call to evangelism if you will. However, it occurred to me, with the help of Dr. Osvaldo Vena's commentary on the gospel reading that I read on the Working Preacher website, that to fish for people is another metaphor for death. To pull fish out of water is to cause their death since they cannot breathe out of water. In other words, Jesus was calling Peter and Andrew to bring people to death.

But once again, this call to bring people to death is to bring them to the same death that we received at the time of our baptism, the death that ties us into Christ's death on the cross. It is, of course, that death brings us to new life in Christ Jesus. When the water is poured over our heads (or if we were lucky enough to be fully immersed in the water of the font) that signified the death of our old sinful selves and the birth of our new life in Christ Jesus. Just like the city of Nineveh, new life with God became possible only through death.

To take this a step further, it is also interesting to ponder the fact that our salvation as brothers and sisters in Christ, the promise of resurrection for us, comes through the cross. The cross was the means of the death of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross to bring forth salvation for the entire world. Again, new life comes through death.

Thankfully, whether it was the city of Nineveh, Jesus death on the cross, and our death in baptism, what is put to death is sin. These deaths that we have experienced through the proclamation of God's word and through sacrament reminds us that we have been freed from sin and that we can live as God desires us to live, which is to live with compassion,



mercy, grace, love, and service toward others be they neighbor, stranger, or enemy. And what gives us the ability and the empowerment to do this is the fact that our sinful hearts have been replaced with the presence of Christ Jesus, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now that Christ resides in our hearts, it becomes easier for us to follow God's ways. And the more that we spend intentional time building a relationship with Christ Jesus, living our lives the way God desires, becomes the very essence of who we are.

But we must also remember the lesson that the book of Jonah conveys to us. To truly love the other is to understand that God's nature, the very essence of God's being, does not exclude any human being from being in loving relationship with God. God does not hate, period! This means that we are called to love those whom we'd rather hate. This can be a difficult pill for us humans to swallow, for sin can still have an influence on us. But, again, the more we are willing to build a loving relationship with God, the more we invest in growing in our love for God, and the easier it will become to have compassion and mercy for those whom we'd rather hate and the easier it will become to serve them, be served by them, and to serve together with them.

The other lesson that Jonah has to teach us is to remember that an empty faith in God, that is to think that we can remain passive to the cries of our broken world—the cries for justice, for equity, and for equality—but believe we are right with God simply because we say “Jesus is Lord” on our lips, will lead to our death and destruction. We, as beloved children, cannot continue to live in patterns of sin (be they individual sins or systemic sins) and think that we are good with God. To truly live into this new life in Christ, is to answer God's call to fish for people, to bring all people to death and new life through baptism, and to teach them what it means to be in a loving relationship with Christ and all of God's children.

Thankfully, the gift of baptism, the gift of Christ's love, the gift of our new lives renews us each day to continue living out our calling to love God and love neighbor. In doing so, who knows, we too may bring an entire city to have faith in God. Or, at the very least, we'll have plenty of fun going fishing.

Amen.

