

Stepping Out, Stepping Up

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2024

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Scripture

Book of Jonah

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Sermon

*Nineveh city was a city of sin The jazzin' and a-jivin' made a terrible din
Beat groups playin' a rock and roll And the Lord when he heard it said, "Bless my soul!"*

*The people wouldn't listen, danced night and day No time for work, no time to pray
They went on dancin' by day and night 'Til the Lord he said, "Well, this ain't right!"*

*The Lord he pondered a subtle plan He looked around for a righteous man
Saw Jonah sittin' 'neath a pineapple tree And the Lord he said, "That's the man for me."*

*"A righteous man that I can trust "To raise this city from out the dust
"The man that's sittin' 'neath the pineapple tree "I'm certain sure, sure, sure is the man for me."*

Jonah Man Jazz, Michael Hand (1966)

Yes, that's the way I remember the story starting. We sang that song, from Michael Hand's Jonah-Man Jazz, in youth choir way back in the 1970's. That's the way the story starts: God had his eye on Jonah, God called on him – gave him a job to do – and as the song and text let us know, Jonah ran away. Ran as far away as it was possible to go. Paid money to sail on a ship to Tarshish --- the place that was pretty much the end of the earth. Because, Jonah thought, surely God couldn't find him there. This task God gave him --- oh, no. Dear Jonah was having none of it.

At the beginning of this tale – one could call it a wisdom story, or even a folktale, filled as it is with humor and vivid characters and drama – at the beginning we can only speculate why Jonah acted as he did. Was he afraid of what might happen to him in Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire? If this place, this people were as unsavory as God seems to indicate, it doesn't look like an ideal assignment for this reluctant prophet.

It is rather stunning, in this tale, at how immediately Jonah takes action though. God's word comes to Jonah in verses 1 & 2, by verse 3 Jonah is already in motion in the opposite direction!

We had a good time in Bible Study on Thursday morning, as we looked at this text. One of things that was noted is how different Jonah's reaction was, compared to other Bible characters. When the voice of God came to Abram, "Go to the land that I will show you..." we didn't see Abram hesitate at all; no internal wrestling there. We compared it also with Mary, the mother of Jesus. The angel Gabriel appears, says, "You will be the mother of a savior" and right away Mary says Yes.

Here, on the other hand, we get to see Jonah's resistance. Not hesitation! We see Jonah's great and grand resistance! Jonah says No! And we travel with him.... all the way to the sea, hoping to go to the farthest reaches with the expectation that God cannot find him there. Yes, Jonah, as the text says, "flees the presence of the Lord."

Ah. But we discover with Jonah that God's voice, God's power and presence is not limited by our expectations. God does find Jonah there! God sends a wind upon the sea and mighty storm. The danger is such that the sailors, despite their greatest efforts, finally ask Jonah, 'What shall we do?' There's a poignancy to Jonah's answer: "Pick me up and throw me into the sea... for I know it is because of me that this great storm is upon you." If Jonah had been running to save his life, how ironic that here he elects to lose it.

Yet, God is faithful to God's prophet still, and in an act of mercy, sends a BIG fish to swallow Jonah up. And Jonah sits, and Jonah thinks, and Jonah reflects, and Jonah prays for three days and three nights. There is time, significant time, for Jonah to wrestle with the character of God and what that means for his life. God, we hear in the beautiful poem, God is a saving God. God finds Jonah even in the depths. God is present in his distress. "God brings up his life from the Pit," the text says. "Deliverance," Jonah states at the end, "belongs to the Lord."

After this beautiful psalm of thanksgiving, the fish spits Jonah up onto dry land.

One could call this the end of Act One. Take a deep breath. Act Two begins.

We hear that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go! Go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the message that I will tell you." 3:1

This time – no surprise – Jonah does set out and gets himself to Nineveh. He delivers this message: in 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown. And an unexpected thing happens!

When the news reaches the king, the ruler immediately declares in action and word that "all will turn from their evil ways and the violence that is in their hands." The text says that God sees their actions and changes God's mind and spares the Ninevites from calamity.

Now we're back to Jonah, back to Jonah's thoughts and emotions.

Remember when we were wondering about why Jonah had run so far away? Here we find out. "O Lord!" he says, "is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;" Jonah says, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Ah! God's mercy – God's mercy is what caused Jonah to run in the first place! And God's compassion is still getting in Jonah's craw. He is angry at this! Seriously angry! And here Jonah says in a voice of melodrama, "And now, O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live." 4:3

In a part of the tale we didn't read, God provides an object lesson involving the shade of a bush. Jonah sits underneath it. We can imagine him eating his popcorn waiting to watch the BOOM! BOOM! destruction of Nineveh. Then a crawling creature destroys the bush, exposing Jonah to the harshness of the sun and the wind. It goes on...

Anyhow, we hear the last words of the text as God speaks to a still-fuming Jonah: "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" 4:9.

That's it. The end of the story. God shows God's love to the vulnerable, to the great city in need by sending Jonah (twice!), in acts of compassion and mercy. We have seen the transformation of the hearts and minds of the people of Nineveh. In the end, we don't know, and we're kind of led to speculate here, about the transformation of the heart and mind of Jonah.

It's a story that invites us to ask questions, isn't it? It's sort of like a parable.

We can ask ourselves questions like these:

Have we ever been like Jonah? Have we been asked to do something possibly life-giving, life-changing and run away from it?

Has our fear or frustration ever tried to drown out God's voice?

We can ask ourselves as a church:

Have we ever thought: "Really, God? That place, those people? Those actions?" Those underserving ones? You want us to care about them? Might it have been our secret desire that they deserve judgement and not mercy? (d365 devotions, Wed. Jan 17)

Reflecting on the adult education class this morning, there can certainly be a question asked here of preachers: has there been Word that God would have us speak, but we were afraid to? Afraid because it showed the extravagant reach of God's love to those who our congregations didn't feel were worthy of it? Afraid because a congregation would judge and reject us? Would we be brave in proclaiming God's message of hope? Or would we run away, like Jonah, and not dare to speak?

Friends....What do we do when we hear the call of God?

Jan Richardson is one of my favorite theologians and artists. That's her work on the front cover.

It goes along with this word of prose, entitled Jonah's Blessing.

Let's take a moment, and imagine ourselves sitting in the belly of a BIG fish. We've been given time and space to reflect, to consider, the nature of God, the nature of God's call upon us.

Listen to her words, as if you, as if we were – if we are -- the reluctant, yet God-called prophet.

*It comes as small surprise
That you would turn your back
On this blessing,
That you would run
Far from the direction
In which it calls,
That you would try
To put an ocean
Between yourself
And what it asks.*

*Something in you knows
This blessing could
Swallow you whole
No matter which way
You turn.*

*Hard to believe, then,
That every line of this blessing
Swims in grace —
Grace that, in the end,
Even you
Will find hard to fathom
So swiftly does it come
And with such completeness,*

*Encompassing all
It finds.*

*What to do, then,
That depends so little
On us
And yet asks of us
Everything?*

*What to do
With such a blessing
That comes with
Such strange provision,
Every inch of it
Looking like something
That will draw us
Into our dying?*

*Trust me when I say
All it wants
Is for you to fall in,
To let yourself
Find yourself
Engulfed within
The curious refuge
That it holds*

*And then to go
In the direction
It propels you,
Following its flow
That will bear you
Where you desired not
Where you dreamed not
Yet none but you
Could land.*

Jan Richardson reminds us that Jonah does not come away feeling warm and cozy about God, because God was not less merciful towards Nineveh than Jonah imagined, but more.

This invites us, she says, to contemplate just what sort of God we follow, who in a time of peril would send provision in the form of great fish, and who stuns us by being more full of grace than we ever imagined. (Epiphany 3: Introduction to "Jonah's Blessing," The Painted Prayerbook)

Our Gospel reading shows us what sort of God we would trust enough, take a risk to follow:

God – who is incarnate,

God's love that is embodied,

God—whose grace is revealed in the person of Jesus.

Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, begins his ministry declaring that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that we are invited to turn and see it --- see the world, live in the world, in an entirely new way.

Jesus summons the fishermen beside the Galilee. They hear God's voice... and they do not run away. Instead, in him, in Jesus - they see something that is so powerful, so overwhelming, that they were willing to change everything to follow him. They immediately leave their nets, leave their boats, leave their family and set out on this new direction, this new trajectory. They hear the call of God and answer Yes.

As we were discussing the in the Bible Study group, we shared how those first disciples were willing to do this, to risk, to enter into this vision of hope and mercy and healing, because there was --- there is -- something greater pulling them! It's the voice of Jesus who says to them:

"Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?"

We hear the call of Jesus --- the grace and mercy and compassion of God in human flesh – and in him we discover that he is the One for whom we would risk it all. We are invited to travel with him into the unexpected and the unknown. He will ask much of us, yet he will be with us, traveling alongside us. It will be tiring, yet he himself feed us, and give us rest. There is something in him, that compels us to go --- in him, the Gospel of John says, is Life, and the life is the Light of all people. (John 1:1)

In this season of the church, we are all called by Jesus to come and follow. And as we know, God's call comes and comes again until we get up and go.

When you have time, in a quiet moment, or maybe – even better – in the midst of your busyness, in your day-to-day routine, imagine this:

Jesus comes to you and says: Follow me.

What happens next?

God's grace, as even Jonah learned, cannot be run away from, cannot be limited, cannot be drowned out, cannot be contained even by our own resistance. God's grace will always invite us, God's mercy will always call us back.

That call is for every one of us --- reluctant prophets and eager fishermen alike.

The good news is here. Let us step up and step out by saying yes to one who calls us – who invites us in – to the welcoming, transforming, saving and healing BIGGEST kin-dom of God.