

3 Epiphany Year B

1/24/2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

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Our lectionary gives us in our first reading today an excerpt from the book of Jonah.

Jonah is a small book in the Old Testament...

In the section referred to as the Minor Prophets.

Minor in the sense of being short.

Jonah is only four very short chapters long.

Yet... it has become one of my favorite books of the Old Testament.

And it is very meaningful for the times that we are in.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Jonah...

or as it is usually called: *Jonah and the Whale*.

Popular as a Sunday School story.

But let me give you a quick summary.

God calls this Israelite prophet named Jonah to go and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh.

Now... Nineveh was one of the largest cities of its time...

Estimated over 120,000 people...

It was part of the Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrian's were enemies of the nation of Israel.
In fact, they destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.
They did not get along... obviously...

And the Assyrians were known for their cruelty and violence.
I will spare you the details on a Sunday morning...
but it was downright evil and gross.

And they were so proud of their violence that they carved images of
their cruelty on walls and so forth that can still be seen today in the ruins
near Mosul, Iraq.

So, Jonah... that prophet from Israel... said...

“uh-uh... I'm not going there.”

And got up and went to a port on the Mediterranean and instead of going
east got on a boat going west.

Well... things did not go well for Jonah.

God sent a great wind...

So that even the seasoned sailors were terrified.

They found out that Jonah was running away from the call of God.

And eventually, Jonah said throw me over the boat.

Jonah was basically saying, “I'd rather die than obey God's call...

I'd rather drown than go preach God's mercy to my enemies.”

Eventually the sailors agreed to throw him overboard.

And God sent a great fish that swallowed Jonah.

Jonah repents in the belly of the fish...

and gets spit up on dry ground.

He then goes to Nineveh and preaches repentance.

Which is where our reading takes place.

Nineveh repents.

God is merciful.

And everyone is happy right?

No!

Jonah did not want his enemies to repent.

He thought his race and nation was better.

Besides they weren't violent like those Assyrians were.

So Jonah goes outside the city...

to watch God's rage and wrath destroy the city.

However... God relents... because the people of Nineveh repent.

Jonah gets mad.

He gets angry with God for showing these people mercy...

They don't deserve God's mercy.

I mean they are violent...

They lie, they cheat, they are unholy...

They are a different race...

They are the enemy...

Jonah is a prophet among God's people.

So Jonah feels very justified in his hate.

Well, God had a plant grow up to give Jonah some shade...

Which Jonah took advantage of.

But in the morning...

God appointed a worm to eat the plant.

The plant died.

And God then appointed a scorching east wind and the sun beat down on Jonah to the point of exhaustion.

And Jonah again just wanted to die.

And God spoke to Jonah saying:

You pity the plant... caring for your own needs...

I pity Nineveh that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle.

And the book ends there.

There are a lot of themes in the story.

But the overall theme is a story about the grace and mercy of God.

God loves people and wants to see them come into the fullness of their creation.

He is a forgiving God.

A loving God.

And never turns away a sinner who repents.

The Assyrian's were an evil empire on so many accounts...

But God had mercy.

God is a merciful God.

And praise the Lord for his mercy...

Because none of us deserve the mercy of God.

Yet, his mercy is new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

And as I consider the ways that this book of Jonah speaks to us today...

In our culture...

In our time...

In our moment...

2 things stand out.

First, just like Jonah God has called you for such a time as this.

God wasn't dumbfounded by the atrocities of the Assyrians.

He knew who they were.

God also wasn't surprised at the racist and judgmental heart of Jonah.

But he called him anyway.

He called Jonah for that moment, that task, during that season.

And in the same way... God is not dumbfounded by all the atrocities and situations in our world.

He knows what is going on.

And he is calling us for such a time as this.

How will we respond to that calling?

Do we run from it like Jonah?

Do we downplay it...?

Do we join many in our world in fear and apathy?

In one of the most famous books of the 20th century...

The Fellowship of the Ring...

the first book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy...

Author, professor, and Roman Catholic...

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote one of the truest statements regarding our role in the times we live in.

In the book, a great evil was rising up...

On the verge of overtaking all of middle earth.

A short hairy fellow... a hobbit... took on the task of going on a long journey in the dim hope of saving middle earth from this great evil.

His name was Frodo, and he was talking about the weight of what was happening in their world with a wise wizard named Gandalf.

Frodo painfully surmised regarding this rising evil:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time."

"So do I," said Gandalf,

"and so do all who live to see such times.

But that is not for them to decide.

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

You see, in much the same way we were created for this moment...

This season...

This age.

We might not be able to control a lot in this world...

But we can control how we respond to it...

How we react to it...

We get to decide what to do with the time that is given us.

And that brings me to the second thing from the book of Jonah.

God has called us in this time for a specific purpose.

God called Jonah to a specific purpose.

A particular calling.

A mission that Jonah was destined for.

To preach to the people of Nineveh.

He has also called us not only for this time but with a specific purpose.

As Christians we have a unique calling in this world.

We prayed it at the beginning of our worship in our opening collect:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation...

Give us grace... to answer the call of Jesus...

And proclaim to some people... no... all people the Good News of Jesus' salvation.

That is our calling.

It is not our calling to hope the priest does well to grow the church and win souls for heaven.

It is not our calling to cheer from the sidelines when the deacons reach out to the poor and broken.

It is our calling... all of us... lay people and ordained people... to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to all people.

And it says it so plainly in our Catechism...
our outline for instruction and official church teaching.
On page 855 in the Book of Common Prayer.

The question is asked:

Who are the ministers of the Church?

The answer:

Your priest is the minister.

No.

It says:

The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

The very first group of people mentioned is lay people... non-ordained people.

And the next question is this:

What is the ministry of the laity?

The answer:

*The ministry of lay persons is the represent Christ and his Church;
to bear witness to him wherever they may be;
and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of
reconciliation in the world;
and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the
Church.*

Our calling as Christians... is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in
this world... to all people.

To people different than us... and to people like us.

To our national enemies...

To our political enemies...

To our local enemies...

How are we representing Christ and his Church in the world?

How are we bearing witness to Jesus in all the places we go both
physically and digitally?

How are we carrying on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world?

In the days of Jonah...

He was called to go preach to his national enemy...

A different race of people...

A violent and cruel people.

He was called for such a time and such a place.

We are called for this time and this place.

To share the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins.

That Jesus rose from the grave and is alive today.

That Jesus is coming back again to set the world at rights.

And that he is calling all people to repent from their sins and be adopted into the family of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

May we be a church filled with the Holy Spirit making a difference in our community and world.

So in a half hour or so ... we will leave church today...

And when we do...

May we go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit...

And be the ministers that we are called to be and proclaim the Good News of Jesus...

May we shine God's light in this world.

The world needs hope...

And we know the author of hope.

Come Holy Spirit... fill us with your holy boldness...

so that we answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and
proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation.

Amen.