

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, January 25, 2015

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This is the Word of the Lord: thanks be to God!

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 fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for 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.

Let us pray....Amen.

Our scripture readings this morning continue to echo the 'call' theme of last week: Jonah, called for a second time to go to Nineveh in our Hebrew Scriptures, and Simon, Andrew, James, and John are called by Jesus to join his journey in our Gospel reading.

Now if I asked for a show of hands, who would be able to say that they know the whole Jonah story, including the part leading up to today's reading? OK. And how familiar is the Gospel reading, have most of you heard this story? So in these modern times, a preacher has to remember that there will always be people hearing the sermon who do not know some of the foundational stories of the bible.

Sometimes this is generational: worshipers over the age of 65 generally report having attended some form of Sunday school, and generally report knowing many of the foundational bible stories, but as we reach into the generations who are 50, 40, 30, and 20, we see less and less biblical literacy.

Sometimes this is denominational: worshipers who have come to us from other expressions of Christianity report more or less experience with the bible, depending on what denomination they grew up in.

I've been serving God's faithful children for about 18 years now, preaching and teaching the scriptures, mostly using the Revised Common Lectionary, a three year repeating cycle. That means that I've had 5 or 6 opportunities to preach on this particular set of scriptures. And each time I've come across our gospel reading, it has bothered me.

It's not the call part of the story, where Jesus calls Simon, and Andrew, and James and John, it's the part where he tells Simon and Andrew that he will make them fish for people.

So in these modern times, when the church is actually a bit desperate for faithful members, we have two important factors influencing us: a growing lack of knowledge about the basic stories and meaning of the bible, and a

more sophisticated understanding of the world when it comes to interpretation and impact.

For some of us, the story of Jesus calling his disciples to fish for people is a metaphor that includes growing the church, evangelizing those who do not know Jesus. The King James version says 'fishers of men'.

And if we can keep open minds for a moment, consider this: the story could just as easily be interpreted to mean that unsuspecting people could be caught in a net against their will, and dragged up to where they can't breathe. Caught in a net. Unable to breathe. Not a pretty picture.

And some critics of the Missionary work done in Africa and Asia in the past might use this metaphor to describe exactly how non-Christians were forced into Christianity: they were caught, and told the old ways were bad and evil, and that the new ways, the Christian ways, were good. Pick the right way, and they would get help. Pick the wrong way, no help.

Even modern evangelists recognize now that the church erred in its zeal to convert as many people as possible in those days. Today's modern missionaries build schools and hospitals, and walk with those who struggle, but make no efforts to 'convert' people from their beliefs.

I believe the net metaphor worked for the church for quite a while. But no longer. Modern sensibilities, a deeper understanding and tolerance for diverse faith traditions, and a growing sense that the Christian faith is undergoing an important transformation leads me to believe that we need to find new interpretations for the old stories. New, powerful ways to hear God's Word with our modern and sometimes jaded ears.

I see my job as being able to make sense of God's Word in scripture, *even if you've never heard the scripture before in your life*. Even if you've heard it, and have a different interpretation of it. Because if modern scholarship has taught us anything about scripture, it's that God's Word evolves for all of us, and that for as many ears there are in worship, there may be that many interpretations of scripture.

Our Hebrew Scripture is only the second half of a longer story. Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, to preach a message of repentance. He refused, and ran away on a ship so he wouldn't have to go. While traveling, a storm came up, and those on the ship drew straws to determine

whose fault it was. Jonah told them he was running away from God, that it was his fault, and that they should throw him into the sea to save themselves.

They did exactly that, and when they did, a giant fish swallowed Jonah, and kept him in its stomach for three days. There Jonah prayed to God. The fish spewed him out onto dry land, and God told Jonah to get to Nineveh to preach repentance. Reluctant, but obedient, Jonah did as he was told.

And he convinced the people of Nineveh to repent, and God spared them.

Our pews and our neighborhoods are filled with Jonahs. We are Jonah. Called by God, but mostly reluctant to answer the call.

Jonah was called to go to Nineveh to preach to a dangerously evil community. But what are we called to do? What does our Gospel lesson call us to do? Cast our nets around for non-Christians or the un-churched so we can catch them for God? No. Of course not.

Maybe at one time, the church needed this kind of evangelism, but no more. Our Christian scripture this morning tells of how Jesus told Simon and Andrew that he would make them fish for people. Fish *for* people, not fish for *people*.

Simon and Andrew fished for a living. Had they been carpenters, Jesus would have told them that he would make them *build* for people. So my modern interpretation of this scripture is that we aren't called to fish for *people*, to catch them in a net, we are called to *give them our fish*.

If we are artists, then we are called to *paint* for people. If we are teachers, then we are called to *teach* for people. Whatever we do, we are called to do that, for others. The modern church can no longer rely on coercing people to join by instilling fear, or casting doubt on another's faith. It can only promise that those who are already members will share their fish, share their paintings, share their teachings...with those who have their own gifts to share.

Follow Jesus, and he will make you serve, for others. Which is completely consistent with his ministry, with his teachings. But catching others in a net, against their will is the exact opposite of how Jesus did ministry. But

that's how the church did it for hundreds, if not thousands of years. And our Post-Christian world is one of the consequences of that approach.

Faith Formation in the 21st Century requires that we claim the biblical traditions and stories that inform our faith with integrity. That means we have to know the stories and metaphors, and that we have to be aware of the modern forces and critiques that will encourage us to run away, like Jonah did.

We can learn from Jonah, we can avoid the metaphorical equivalent of being lodged in a fish's belly until we agree to answer the call. We can fish for people, teach for people, serve ham and eggs for people, put out fires for people, represent people in court, wash dishes for people, heal people, do taxes for people, raise children...all in the name of Jesus. We don't have to change what we do in order to answer our call, we only have to change for whom we do it for!

Even if we have retired from whatever it was we did, we can still be kind to others, be forgiving of others, be patient with others. We can still reflect on those we served when we were actively employed, or engaged.

To modern and untrained ears, our Gospel lesson sounds perverse, sounds like we are meant to bring people to the faith against their will. Our job is to prove that it really means that we are to share our vocations and our passions with others so that they will see the truth in Christ's way.

That is neither threatening nor antagonistic. Just the way Jesus was to those he loved.

God calls us to serve, like Jonah. Jesus calls us to follow, like Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Those calls are constant, and consistent.

How will we answer? Will we run, like Jonah did the first time? Will we follow through like Jonah did the second time? Will we do it reluctantly? Or, like Simon and Andrew, willingly, without reservation? Like James and John, without question?

Whether you've known these scriptures since childhood, or whether today was the first you've heard of them, can we at least agree that God reveals new truth in God's Holy Word, time and time again? I believe the new truth in God's Word for today is calling us to act *for* people, to bring our gifts to

bear for others. That's the way the modern church will share with the world. That's how we follow Jesus. Amen.