

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

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Epiphany 3
Year B

Get Up and Follow Me

“Stories remind us how to climb inside each other’s souls.” Thus says Megan McKenna, Irish storyteller extraordinaire. And what better stories to climb into on this 3rd Sunday of the season of Epiphany than the well-worn Old Testament tale of Jonah and the calling of Christ’s first disciples. Themes in these stories include fish and shores, mercy beyond human comprehension and calling beyond our comfort zones.

For a book that contains only 48 verses, Jonah packs a wallop! So hold on to your hats, and fasten your seatbelts, because we’re jumping right in. The book of Jonah, like all good stories, can be divided into a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning sets the scene, introduces characters and describes the main conflict. Our lectionary reading for this morning picks up the story in the middle so let’s review what has taken place so far.

Jonah, a prophet of the Lord, has been sent by God to preach repentance to the Ninevites. He refuses, boards a ship that’s leaving town, and ends up causing all sorts of mayhem on board. He is eventually thrown overboard, only to be swallowed by a large fish, in whose belly Jonah resides for 3 days before being spewed up onto the shore. That’s quite the beginning.

In chapter three, we find Jonah at the midpoint of his story, sitting on a beach, probably wondering if he’s having the worst nightmare ever or if this is really his life. After all, he’s just been projectile vomited onto the shore by a whale.

And so the word of the Lord came a **second** time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.” (Jonah 3:2) **“Get up”** – two simple, yet strong action words

denoting movement. They are not berating but persistent – as if God is saying, “Jonah, did you really think you were going to escape from my presence? Where could you possibly go that I would not find you? I need you to do this. This is what I have called and recalled you to.”

If I were Jonah I would have asked for some time off to process the day’s events; after all, it had been quite the roller coaster. I would have requested some time to blog about my experiences or at the very least, check into the nearest accommodation for a much needed shower. But there would be no time off. There was an urgency to God’s calling and Jonah got up and walked begrudgingly toward Nineveh.

So what did Jonah have against the Ninevites? Turns out these were the Israelites arch-enemies, known for evil, despicable violence and cruel torture. And since the Ninevites were Jonah’s enemy he assumed that they should also be God’s enemy. Isn’t that how we think life should work? Doesn’t God despise those groups or individuals that we consider to be our own Ninevites? Because surely, God is on our side! Author Anne Lamott has famously mused that “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”¹ Indeed!

In verse four we read that “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk” before he finally uttered his eight word prophecy, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” (Jonah 3:4b) This turns out to be the world’s shortest sermon. No clever illustrations, no funny stories, and no talk of repentance. Just eight words-(five in the original language.) And with this proclamation Jonah becomes the most successful prophet of all time! The response to his half-hearted broadcast was that the Ninevites believed. All 120,000 of them repented.

When the news reached the king he rose from his throne, removed his robe and covered himself in sackcloth and ashes. (Jonah3:6) He called on everyone else to do the same, including the animals! All turned from their evil and violence. When God saw how they repented, God’s mind was changed and

the Ninevites were not overthrown. Well, not in the way they expected but they were definitely overturned by God's indescribable mercy.

Who wasn't overthrown? Stubborn Jonah. You see, Jonah had boundary issues. Not his own, but what he perceived as God's lack of boundaries. **What kind of God forgives just anyone?** Jonah wanted the Ninevites to receive their "comeuppance." Their "just desserts." They needed to get what was coming to them. Jonah believed that God's mercy was something he could control just by doing a lousy job. But Jonah knew better for in the last section of this story, as he sits under a vine that God so graciously provided for him, Jonah confesses the reason for his running away. He says, "I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (Jonah 4:2) In most stories, this is the section in which the main character experiences some internal change, but Jonah's story is left open for interpretation.

One thing we do know for sure: The book of Jonah is not just about Jonah's efforts to create God in his own image. It's about God's love and mercy for all people. These scriptures remind us that we live in God's reality – not ours. Jonah forgot his calling – not just the call of "prophet" but the call to love, forgive, and show compassion to all people. And yet, God used this pouty, petulant prophet and is that not a glorious message of hope for the rest of us?

To what and to who are we called? In today's Gospel we learn that John the Baptist has been arrested, and Jesus, having returned from his harrowing 40 days in the wilderness, appears on the outskirts of town, walking along the edge of the shore where fishermen are going about their everyday tasks.

Listen to the urgency in the simple message Jesus delivers. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near: repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14) He's saying: Listen to me!

God's power is at work. The kingdom of God is arriving! Right now! Right here! Can't you picture Jesus

walking towards Galilee, repeating this message to everyone he meets? What a sharp contrast to how Jonah proclaimed his message!

Jesus is always moving forward and moving us along with him. On that day Jesus was on a mission to create a community that would bring the good news to all who were willing to listen. Notice that Jesus takes the initiative in the story. He goes to the fishermen. He invites. He leads, He pursues. Just as God pursued Jonah. Just as God pursues us.

And when he approaches Simon and Andrew on the shore of the lake he doesn't yell, "Yoo-hoo! Excuse me! Hi! I'm Jesus and I'd love to talk to you about the good news? I'm having a clam bake right down the beach at around lunchtime? I'm going to be laying out my plan on how you can become...are you ready for this? Fishers of people! Pretty crazy huh? Anyhoo, hope to see you all there.

No. Jesus uses a more direct approach – **"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."** **FOLLOW ME**....Just like in our passage from Jonah....two simple yet strong action words. No explanation given. "And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And the same scene is repeated with James and his brother John. Following Jesus meant that their lives and their relationships would never be the same.

So, is Jesus calling us to walk away from our lives as we know them? Leave Port Townsend? Move to China? Enroll in seminary? Perhaps, and that would involve careful discernment. But Jesus is not calling us away from something as much as toward something and that something is him – the good news! Jesus is calling us out of our self-interest and into the lives and needs of everyone in this church, in this town, and in this world. So often we think that there is no way we can measure up to the way these fishermen walked away from everything they had ever known. And so we think why bother? I don't have that kind of faith; therefore, I must not be called.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that “this is not a story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before,”²

And yes, the fishermen dropped their nets and followed. But in the days to come they had much to learn. Like us they made great progress and like us they made great messes. We know their stories – of how James and John had some “Jonah” in them, for later on, when the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus, the brothers had a plan to command fire to come down from heaven to consume the village. (Luke 9:51-56) And let’s not forget Simon Peter denying Christ three times. (Luke 22:54-56.) For all their mistakes, Jesus continued to love them and they continued to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. As are we.

In Christ’s new reality of kingdom living, we may be called to bring the good news to foreign shores, or we may be called to stay right here and serve at Just Soup, knit prayer shawls, or teach Godly Play. We may be called to serve on the city council, care for an aging parent, or coach a Little League team. But in the myriad of choices of where our calling may take us, let us remain open to hearing God call all of us out of our self-interest and into the lives and needs of everyone, even and especially our “Ninevites.”

Are we going to choose the way of Jonah or the way of the disciples? Are we going to answer the command to “Get up?” or “Follow me?” Here’s more good news! We’re Episcopalians and we don’t do “either/or.” We practice the “both/and” so we are called to **get up and follow Jesus**. And we do that by living out our baptismal covenant.

By loving God, by continuing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship. In the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. By resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, by repenting and returning to the Lord. By proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. And by seeking Christ in all persons,

loving our neighbors as ourselves. We live into our call by striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. And we do all of this how? With God's help.

At the end of this service our Deacon Karen Pierce will, in dismissing us from this place, invite us, as she does every Sunday, to leave this place to go "fishing." Karen will stand on the threshold of this building, with one foot inside the church and one foot outside the church, bridging the church and the world, and she will commission us into our calling as she says these words: "Let us go forth into the world, with Jonah and Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and all the saints, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, who gives us the grace needed to live out our calling." **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

¹Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing*. Pantheon Books: 1994

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way: Miracle on the Beach*, Cowley Publications: 1999, p. 39