

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Jonah 1:1-4:11; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

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How to convey the strangeness of this word that comes to Jonah: *Get up, go to Nineveh with my word for them.* We hear God's second word to Jonah this morning. The first was the same; it was so shocking, so unacceptable that Jonah turned tail and went as fast as he could in the opposite direction. Instead of eastward, overland to Assyria, he sailed westward across the Mediterranean for the Spanish port of Tarshish.

How to convey the strangeness of this word? Maybe this, today: *Go at once to Damascus, that great city, and cry out against it Or, Go at once to Tehran*

But that doesn't really do it; we are not overpowered by Syria or Iran. Maybe something closer to home for us, thinking back to the fall of 2001: *Go at once to Afghanistan, and cry out against Bin Laden and al Qaeda Or, in 1942: Go at once to Tokyo*

Something to get the flavor of telling a prophet of ancient Israel to go to the heart of the cruel and bloody empire that dominated the whole territory from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, and had done for centuries. Assyria is a fierce enemy of the Israelites, deeply feared and hated. The Assyrians overran the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th Century B.C.E., deporting the people, scattering them, bringing in foreigners to colonize their land.

It is time and more than time to deal with Nineveh: *for their wickedness has come up before me,* says the Lord, and Jonah is the one to tell them (1:2). So when Jonah flees, God pursues. The Lord "hurled a mighty wind upon the sea, and . . . such a mighty storm that the ship threatened to break up" (1:4). The terrified sailors discover that it is Jonah's God assailing them. "What shall we do?" they ask him. "Pick me up and throw me into the sea . . ." he says. maybe he'd rather drown than carry God's word to Nineveh

But the sailors have compassion for him. They do not want to be guilty of innocent blood. They try to row for shore, but the storm grows worse. They throw him over. The sea is calm.

Then comes the part we all remember: the belly of the whale. Here's how it happens. God *provides* a large fish to swallow up Jonah. God *provides* the fish. In response to Jonah's flat out disobedience, God has compassion. When Jonah finally prays, asking for deliverance, God speaks to the fish and it vomits Jonah up on the beach.

Hearing the word of the Lord a second time, he goes to Nineveh with the bad news: *forty days more and you will be done for.* Time's up. Judgment has come on the Evil Empire. Justice will be done. They will be destroyed

But right away the people listen; they believe God. They fast, mourn, repent. When word reaches the king, he gets down from his throne, takes off his robe, puts on sackcloth, sits in ashes. He orders that everyone—human and animal—fast, be covered with sackcloth, cry to God, and "turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." (The violence that is in their hands—what an image!) "Who knows?" he says, "God may relent and change his mind . . ." (3:6-9)

Step back a moment. What is the likelihood that a cruel and violent people, led by their king, would respond this way to the voice of a lone foreigner walking through the capital, calling out *in 40 days you'll be overthrown*? Why do they not lock him up, interrogate him, find out whose spy he is, kill him, or just laugh him out of town? I do not know whether there ever has been anything like it. (In a conversation of preachers last week I heard someone say that the most likely part of the story is Jonah's being swallowed up by a fish.¹)

The story is not historical. It didn't happen. The empire kept on with cruelty and violence until it was defeated by Persia and Babylon. Nineveh was destroyed. (Read the Book of the Prophet Nahum for the celebratory ode about this.) But the story is trying to tell us something.

I wonder. Is there some awareness in the land that the violence in their hands is evil? Some recognition at work just below the surface that the story they've been telling themselves about their entitlement to unlimited power and wealth is a lie? That their story that it is right to dominate and exterminate their neighbors because they are backward and weak, "not like us," is a lie?

I think we always do know, somewhere in the depths of ourselves, that our stories about "us and them" we learn, tell ourselves and live out of, are a lie. That in our best selves we are always hoping to hear the lie named and exposed, to be freed from it.

God, who was about to destroy Nineveh, changes God's mind. ("God *repented*" the RSV translates the Hebrew here.) Judgment and compassion, two faces of God, are so close. This, too, is stunning.

That God repented, changed his mind, is almost the end of the story, but not quite. Jonah is angry, with God. He prays: *I knew it. This is why I ran away to begin with.* "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." For this he is angry. He wants to die.

Why is he angry over God's compassion, I wonder. Does he feel like a fool because his prophecy of judgment was not fulfilled? But it was successful. The people repent, change their minds. Does he not want to be part of God's compassion toward a people who did terrible things? A people he judges unworthy of compassion?

As the story of Jonah ends, we do not know whether Jonah will change his own mind, let go his judgment of Nineveh, let go his anger and even rejection of God. Or he will be the only one in the story not to repent, not to turn to compassion, not to take a new way? There is an aching at the end of the story like the aching at the end of a story Jesus will tell centuries later about a father who had two sons, the elder of whom stands outside the door of their father's welcome home feast for his lost brother. (Luke 15:11-32)

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord in Isaiah (55:6). And yet, God keeps on reaching out, surprising us with grace, mercy, forgiveness; trying to draw us from our ways to God's. Showing us this is urgent. Now is the time to give up our bad news and live into the good news of God's steadfast love for the world.

¹Sermon Brainwave for 3 Epiphany, 1/22/12, www.workingpreacher.org/sermonbrainwave

Jesus comes to Galilee, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Repent. Change your mind, see differently. Look at yourselves and your lives and your neighbors through a new lens, see everything turned upside down. Align yourselves with God’s rule, God’s ways, God’s purpose.

He proclaims a new state of affairs is at hand, a new future. And one day, now it is time. “Follow me,” he says to Simon, Andrew, James and John. “I will make you become fishers of people.” The fishing metaphor isn’t perfect. No one is going to eat the “fish”. They will feed them, heal them, send them out.

Jesus will transform the disciples not by force, but by attraction. He will make you and mould you by association with him, by your following after him, seeing what he does, seeing the way he walks in the world, listening to what he says—as we will do in the coming weeks with the Gospel according to Mark. Jesus in action heals the sick, forgives sins, teaches God’s ways and purpose, and casts out demons—lots of them, in Mark.

“Demons,” a strange image for us. We might think of them as the emotional, spiritual, cultural forces that suck the life out of people; soul-eaters, like the dementors in Harry Potter. The demonic is perhaps the most distorted kind of mind that can take hold on a human being, twisting a person’s thinking and perceiving completely away from the goodness and love that are God, alienating a person completely from himself and everyone and everything around him.

Jesus’ healing the demon possessed in mind and spirit is a particular sign, in Mark, that something new and compelling has come among us. Now is the time for our suffering world and nation to take heed. To stop believing in the bad news, and believe in the good news of God’s judgment and compassion. Stop living out of fear, greed, anger, bitterness, violence and force. Give up “us and them.” Take up the way of freedom and life.

A word about Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. “The appointed time has grown short,” he writes. Time to live differently is now; a whole string of “as though nots”—as though not married, not mourning, not rejoicing, not having possessions, not having dealings with the world. For Paul, the appointed time has grown short; Jesus is about to return. How about for us? How do we live in the urgency, how are to be transformed in our minds and lives?

We began with a story, we end with a story. An old monk, a Buddhist, had practiced meditation long and well, but never came to complete stillness or peace. Asked the Zen master for permission to go off and practice in the mountains. “there’s nothing else I want but to understand this: the true nature of myself, of this world.”

Left the monastery, walked to the mountains. Down the mountain trail came an old man carrying a great bundle on his back. The old man said, “Say friend, young monk, where are you going?” The monk told his story. “I’ve practiced all these years and all I want now is to know that which is true. Tell me, old man, do you know anything of this enlightenment?” At which point the old man simply let go of the bundle; it fell to the ground and the monk was enlightened.

“So now what?” the monk asked. The old man reached down and picked up the bundle again and walked off to town.^[1]

Put it all down. Let it all go, all the old stories, all the old ways of relating to self and the world, all the bad news. Once you put the old life down, let it go, “then with understanding and compassion” with a changed mind “you can pick it up again.”

^[1] Gordon Peerman, Blessed Relief: what Christians can learn from Buddhists about suffering (Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2008), 21-22.