

Epiphany 3B
January 22, 2012

St. Andrew's

Jonah 3.1-5, 10
Ps 62.6-14
1 Corinthians 7.29-31
Mark 1.14-20

You know I think the lectionary is pretty weird sometimes. Maybe we can figure out why we are reading some things each Sunday and maybe we can't. I guess since it's all Holy Scripture we can't go too wrong, right? But today I think we were seriously robbed! We only read from Jonah twice in a three year cycle and we missed the second one last summer when we were busy reading Exodus. So if what we read this morning is all we hear of Jonah, we've missed the really good and interesting stuff!

It's probably blasphemy of some sort to think that the Ninevites repenting of their sins and God changing the divine mind about smiting them is uninteresting. There is some pretty serious comfort in knowing that our choices and behavior affect God's choices and response no matter how much Jonah yells and rants about it.

But the compelling part of the story of Jonah comes before one little word that we just read: "second." *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.* The most familiar part of the story happened in response to the first time God spoke to Jonah. So here's a quick Reader's Digest abridged version of the Book of Jonah:

Jonah is commissioned by God to go to the Ninevites to cry out against their wickedness. Jonah rebels and tries to run away from God by getting on a boat going in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh.

A great wind comes up threatening the boat, and fearing that God is doing it because of Jonah and that they will all perish, the sailors pitch him overboard as a sacrifice and the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah up.

While in the belly of the fish for three days, Jonah got a clue and thanked and worshipped God for saving his life, so the fish "spewed" him up onto the land.

Now the word comes to Jonah a second time and he decides he can go give those Ninevites the business, openly hoping that the Lord will indeed smite them because they are such wicked dirtbags.

But darned if those Ninevites didn't repent and God's mind was changed so that Nineveh was spared and that really made Jonah mad, because after all they deserved to be punished, right? God says, Jonah, it's really not all about you, it's about me and I can forgive if I want.

Now that's an interesting story, because we can relate to so many parts of it. The paradox between Jonah heading off in the opposite direction when God calls, and the disciples literally leaving their

lives on the spot when Jesus calls is pretty dramatic. We really don't know anything from the gospels about how the disciples felt about Jesus' call to them, what it was that actually made them turn away from their livelihood and their families and follow this itinerant preacher, only that they did. And honestly, that's a pretty tough act to follow and none of us have done it and none of us have even really come close to it. It's much easier to relate to Jonah.

Todd Weir¹ wrote that Jonah may be one of our patron saints and that the world conspires to make Jonah-s out of all of us. "The world beats us down [Weir writes] and tells us that you can't change the big picture, so just fall in line," keep your head down and your nose clean and just look after yourself and your family. "Our values may tell us we need to head east to Nineveh, but we turn around and walk west and get on the boat with Jonah, because it's just too hard. We spend some of our precious time in the belly of the whale, out of touch with our calling, our sense of meaning and purpose."

Jonah didn't have any credentials or credibility for that kind of diplomacy; about the same as we'd have if we believed Congress would sit in sackcloth and ashes after our demands that they quit taking corporate campaign funds. We know about Jonah's urge to run from what God might be asking of us. Jonah's way may seem easier at first [Weir continues], but it puts us more out of purpose, makes it less possible to live the life we want, and in the end we get thrown overboard and end up in the belly of the whale.

Jonah had at least three days to think about it there in the dark; but "immediately," as Mark is so apt to say, Peter, Andrew, James and John, in just four little verses, left their nets, their security and their families to follow Jesus.² They didn't take time to deliberate, consult each other or their families, move money out of savings into checking, sell the boat, nothing.

Maybe it's not that we don't want to live into our values of compassion and community and spreading the good news of Jesus, it's just easier to pay the fare for a boat in the opposite direction and hope God doesn't notice. Maybe we cling to what we think we have created and need as a way to protect ourselves from the life-changing power of Jesus Christ and its demands on us.

It reminds me of a pretty funny Facebook posting I got this week through a colleague. It's called Sayings of the Yiddish Buddha. You have to imagine Barbra Streisand at her Jewish mother best saying this: "The Torah says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The Buddha says, 'There is no self.' So, maybe we're off the hook."

Thinking we're off that hook may land us overboard and in the belly of the whale. Yet don't miss the words: "but the Lord provided a fish." The time in that belly was holy time. God provided another chance and then called Jonah a second time and responded to the penitent people. The Collect for this morning begins, "Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ..." We had two examples of answering that divine call, one the long and circuitous route over land and sea, and the other direct and immediate. Even when we're as big a jerk as Jonah, begging for our enemies to be taken out, or abandoning Jesus like

¹ Todd Weir, "Give Jonah a break," <http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com>, January 14, 2006.

² *ibid*, all through the sermon; it's a really good blog for this week and I appreciate it.

these disciples will, God can use us to do God's things. We're not off the hook; time in a fish changes everything.

The character of God's call to us is a journey.³ Following Jesus may put us back on the road to Nineveh, to that place we don't want to go to do those things we don't want to do with people we don't want to do them with. Often hearing God's call can be through odd connections with people, circumstances, or while sloshing around in a really big fish taking stock of our lives and our ministries.

Ben Helmer writes that answering the call of Jesus is based on listening and being ready to respond. Listening requires us to filter out the noise of our own heads as well as the noise around us and this is no simple or straightforward proposition. Following Jesus will certainly lead us to a new place and we will be given the grace we need to respond.

2012 may be a year of intentional prayer and listening for God's call to our ministry here at St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's; a year of discernment. We are at a place of extraordinary stability and hope and we're absolutely on the hook. Where will this journey take us as individuals, as a community of faith, as a people of hope and confidence and courage?

"Back in 2008, Kevin Kelly wrote⁴ that a successful enterprise needs 1000 true fans." We're not going to come close to that. Jesus settled on 12 and started out with four. We've got all that we need right here to do just about anything God asks. As we look ahead, what will that be? How will we listen and hear? How will we respond to the call? The psalmist replies: *For God alone my soul in silence waits; * truly, my hope is in God.*⁵

Gail Wheatley+

³ Ben E. Helmer, [Sermons that Work](#), January 22, 2012 – Third Sunday after the Epiphany (B).

⁴ Caspar Green, "[Who are your Fans?](#)" The Scarlet Letter Bible, January 16, 2012.

⁵ Psalm 62.6