

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 21, 2018
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace...

We have before us today two of the shortest sermons in history.

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, knew, *he just knew*, that God was gracious and merciful and likely to extend saving grace even to those awful Assyrians. Nineveh was a major city in Assyria, and was known far and wide for its evil and cruelty. Assyrians were the hated enemies of the Hebrew people, responsible for the destruction of the nation of Israel in 722 BCE. There was nothing Jonah was less interested in than proclaiming God's word to these...well, choose your derogatory descriptor.

That's the reason for the grand adventure you know as "Jonah and the Whale." In short, God commanded the prophet to go to Nineveh and Jonah went as far and as fast as he could in the opposite direction. After a terrible storm and god-fearing sailors who threw him into the sea, Jonah was swallowed by a big fish where he remained for three days. Finally even the big fish was sick of him and vomited him up on dry land. God commanded Jonah once again to preach to the Ninevites, so he walked to the middle of the city saying, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That's it. One sentence from a preacher who didn't want to preach, and "the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on

sackcloth.” God saw their repentance – and God too repented of the destruction that was their destiny. That’s quite a sermon.

In Mark’s Gospel, self-described as “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” we hear Mark’s account of Jesus’ very first words:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God has come near.

Repent.

Believe in the good news.

Four phrases, joined into a one sentence proclamation – Jesus’ first sermon according to Mark. Four phrases, each one packed with implications...and introduced with the time stamp: “Now after John was arrested.” Mark’s gospel is short, direct, and urgent. This author wastes no words – there are no “throw away” phrases in this account.

We’re only fourteen verses into this story.

- We’ve only just met John, the one baptizing in the wilderness and preparing the way for the one who is to come, the one who is more powerful.
- Jesus has been baptized, he has seen the heavens torn apart, has heard God’s voice declare that he is God’s

Beloved Son, and has experienced the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove.

- The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted by Satan.

And John has been arrested.

It is with this ominous backdrop that Jesus comes to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. John's message of repentance, simply pointing toward a greater one who is to come, was enough to get him arrested by the powers in charge. Jesus comes proclaiming that the kingdom of God, the imperial reign of the Holy One of Israel is at hand. The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God is close enough to reach out and touch. "This is the Good News," as we say when we have heard the Gospel. End of sermon.

This past weekend I went with friends to offer support and companionship to a clergy colleague who is working on writing her thesis for her Doctor of Ministry in Preaching degree. As clergy types will do, we spent a little time talking about the purpose of preaching – considering what it is a sermon is supposed to accomplish. My friend offered a quote from the Reverend Richard Lischer, an ELCA pastor and preaching instructor, who has written (among other things), The End Of Words. Lischer asserts that the goal of preaching is to *shape a people*, not just to convert the hearts of individuals, as is too often assumed.

Preaching is a communal endeavor – a word spoken and heard in community. Even Jesus' call of his disciples is mostly described as a plural invitation. As Jesus walked the shore of the Sea of

Galilee he called Simon AND his brother, Andrew. A little further on, he invited James and his brother John, as they were at work with their father and the hired hands.

Like Jonah's sermon to the entire city, Jesus' message is indeed personal, but it is never private. The proclamation of Good News, the nearness of God's reign, is an invitation to participate in a way of being in community, a way of finding one's identity in relationship to God and to others. To see our identity as belonging to the reign of God is to realize that we are not conformed to the empires of this world. Christ's invitation to turn in a new direction and to place our trust in the reign of God is to (as we say in our Baptismal liturgy) "reject the forces of evil and all that draws us away from God."

I confess that when I look around, I see little evidence of God's reign that Jesus promised was close enough to touch. Like you, I'm concerned, even frightened, by what I hear in the news and what I witness in the dehumanizing way individuals treat one another. The erratic weather near and far creates in me a sense of near-constant dis-ease. Even closer to my heart I worry about relationships that are broken and families that are struggling. I know of many who feel betrayed by their own bodies as illness and aging seem to be compromising even the most basic functions. I wonder how many will manage to make ends meet, find a safe place to live, remake their lives after violence, or drug use, or prison time. And, like all of you, I'm profoundly aware of the failure of our elected leaders to even manage to govern at all.

The concerns are real. And they were no less real in Jesus' time and place. "After John was arrested," Jesus came proclaiming the good news of God and saying, the kingdom of God has come

near; repent, and believe in the good news.” In twos and threes Jesus collected his closest disciples. In crowds Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. Jesus walked among the people, caring for those who suffered and bringing hope to those who felt they had nothing left to lose. Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God’s reign. And he *lived* God’s reign, moment by moment, in the way he engaged in community.

Jesus called fishermen to fish for people. He called tax collectors to collect resources in service to God’s reign. He called an isolated woman to speak gospel to her community. He called healers to heal not just bodies but whole communities. Notice that Jesus didn’t call his disciples to *come to church*. Jesus called ordinary people to see their vocations through the lens of God’s reign, in service to God and neighbor. In the face of a brutal empire, Jesus revealed the better realm in which we are called to live. We gather as church to learn what the reign of God actually looks like, and to join with one another to live into that revelation in our larger community; and to invite others to join in that way of life. It is a revelation and a promise that brings hope even in the midst of despair, and peace even in the face of death.

To believe in the good news is to trust in the reign of God that Jesus announces. To believe in the good news is to *act as if* God’s reign is in fact the realm that shapes our decisions and choices, our words, and our interactions with and for the people around us. To repent is to turn away from the forces that insist “this is all there is,” and “we have to be realistic.” Jesus brought to life a different orientation, one that rejects the violence and cruelty of this world. Jesus’ call to follow him is an invitation to see the world as God would have it be...and to behave accordingly.

Because, just as Jonah feared, God is indeed gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The God of our proclamation is a God who will stop at nothing to bring all creation into right relationship, rooted justice and surrounded in love. It will take more than one sentence; more than one sermon; just as it takes more than one seed to make a garden and more than one fish to fill a net. We are the planters, the fishers, the builders, the tenders – the ones who put our trust in Jesus' proclamation and promise that the reign of God is near.

This is just the beginning of the Good News.

Amen.