

Morning Message

Will you pray with me? Holy God, creator of a new reality coming into our view, we have come today to see and touch and know your presence here among us. Be with us as we listen for your call, either through me or in spite of me, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Here is truth, repeated from last Sunday's message. There is much that can keep us from hearing what needs to be heard. Sometimes, we are so intent on listening to the voice in our own head that we miss the message that God has for each of us. Especially if God's message is one that would send us in a different direction from the path on which we are travelling. A change in direction – a sudden change in direction – that's what we discover in our Scripture readings this morning.

For sure, Jonah didn't get that a sudden change in direction is sometimes called for. Like some other Biblical prophets, Jonah was a reluctant one. Unlike the others, however, he went to great lengths to avoid God, and really paid a price for running in the opposite direction from that to which God was calling him. Onto a ship, into the raging seas, into the belly of the whale, where Jonah finally turned to God in prayer. And so God gave Jonah a second chance – which is where we pick up our reading of Jonah's story this morning. But this reading and indeed, this story, is not just about Jonah and the big fish. This is the story of the citizens of Nineveh, an uncommonly large city that was the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire – the empire that was the enemy of the Israelites at that time. It was a city full of Gentiles who were sinful and didn't "know" God as the Israelites did. It's the story of how an un-Godly city responded to the message Jonah carried to them from God – the message that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days. Upon receipt of the message, a very sudden and very stunning change in direction occurred – "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth..." The king declared that, "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." Nineveh responded to God's words by repenting and turning to belief in God! In contrast to the "insider," Jonah the Israelite, who hears God's word and repeatedly disobeys, the Ninevites hear a one-sentence sermon from Jonah and they repent, led by their king. And then, even more stunning for Jonah, God makes a very sudden change in direction by forgiving the citizens of Nineveh, thus sparing them from destruction. God changed God's mind! To the people at the time this story of Jonah was first told, it said something very important about God: God is not an uncaring, unreasonable tyrant. God is able to change, and to respond to repentance with forgiveness and protection. For early Christians, the story of Jonah and the response of the

Ninevites to Jonah's prophecy represented mercy and pardon for sinners, and God's universal plan for salvation that included the Gentiles. For them, it became one of their most important faith stories.

So Jonah didn't get that a sudden change in direction is sometimes called for, at least not right away. But Simon, Andrew, James and John, in our passage from the Gospel of Mark, did get it, that's for sure. Mark's story of Jesus' call to these disciples is compelling. The only words reported by Mark are those spoken by Jesus. Drawn only by his call, the fishermen drop everything and become disciples – just like that! Now that's a sudden change in direction! They stepped forward on faith – a faith that simply responded to a plain and straightforward call. That call would provide them with more questions than answers, but because it was Jesus calling them, they responded immediately. We don't know what happened long-term to the Ninevites after their sudden change in direction, but we do know that for Simon, Andrew, James, and John, the call from Jesus was only the beginning. From them we learn that becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime. Christianity is for now and for the long haul.

In our reading from Jonah, the Ninevites made a sudden repentance and conversion. The Ninevites heard a one-sentence sermon and repented. In what was devastating news the Ninevites, foreigners and enemies of Israel, heard God's voice and believed, and then put their belief into action. In our reading from Mark, Jesus proclaims news – the good news of the kingdom of God – that stops those first disciples in their tracks. The news and he who bears it are so compelling that the Galilean fishermen suddenly drop their nets and never look back. “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” This declaration penetrates them to their core and fills a void they had inside without even knowing it. Jonah's prophecy to the people of Nineveh penetrates them to their core and fills a void they had inside without knowing it. Every one of us carries that same void. Call it whatever – our humanness, the taint of human sin (original sin, as some call it), the ache of alienation or inexplicable loneliness, a sense of unfulfillment or restless boredom. This fundamental uneasiness isn't overcome until we hear the right news – the good news – in the way that speaks most powerfully to us, and we realize it's what we have been waiting for. We remember and cherish those rare moments when, in the midst of life's many ambiguities, the right choice suddenly becomes clear – the right and often sudden change in direction.

Jesus' call to the disciples is powerful and full of authority. The disciples respond immediately and without hesitation. God's message to the Ninevites is powerful and full of authority. The Ninevites respond immediately and without hesitation. The Ninevites and the disciples act on faith – a faith that is based not on understanding or appreciating, but a faith that simply responds to a straightforward call or message. Because they somehow sense that it is Jesus, for the disciples, and God, for the Ninevites, who speak to them.

In this season of Epiphany, this time of mystical discovery, God can break into our world and our lives with a power that disrupts our day-to-day living. God can reorder our values and our very comfortable lives. Whatever goals we may establish for ourselves, by whatever values we live, wherever we think we are headed, these stories remind us that we should not be surprised by a sudden change in direction. Jonah heads out for Tarshish and ends up in Nineveh. The once proud king of Nineveh takes off the royal robe and puts on sackcloth. Even God changes God's own mind about the fate of the city. Everyone in this story repents, including God. Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop their nets, leaving behind the fishing vocation they've known for their whole lives. Everyone in today's Scripture passages experiences a surprising and sudden change in direction. And through it all, I am reminded of a Jewish proverb: "Whenever someone says, 'I have a plan,' God laughs."

God makes the call and then gives us the faith we need to respond. In the midst of our everyday lives, God breaks in. This is the good news: we are called anew each day to have faith in God's call, and to follow Jesus. May you hear it, know it, live it, and share it.

Words of Confession and Pardon:

Hear the good news! Before you turned to God, God was on watch for you. Before you remembered your sin, God extended redeeming and amazing grace. Hear these words: You are forgiven. Thanks be that God stands watch over our lives. Thanks be to God for the grace that meets us where we are, but doesn't leave us there.