

“Called to a New Path”
January 21, 2024
Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:16-20

Most of us probably know the story of Jonah. It’s one of the first stories we’re taught in Sunday School I suppose because it involves a large fish that swallows him. And it’s really a great story! It’s concise; it’s suspenseful; it’s dramatic and it’s funny. It really is a funny story. Jonah is one of only two of the prophets who have books named after them who are also mentioned in First and Second Kings. The other is Isaiah. So, none of the prophets represented in the other books, like Jeremiah and Malachi and Amos, are ever mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. Granted, Jonah’s mention in Second Kings is very brief, but he’s there.

Why Jonah is chosen as the subject of this story is anyone’s guess. If you read the book of Jonah you’ll find it doesn’t sound like any of the other prophets’ books. We don’t hear any of his pronouncements; he doesn’t use the familiar, “thus saith the Lord” formula. Instead we find a story about a man who is desperate to avoid doing what God calls him to do. Jonah runs away. He books passage on a ship bound for “Tarshish” which is about as far away as he can go, sort of like going to “Timbuktu.” But he fails to get very far. And when it’s discovered that he’s the reason the sea is so choppy and dangerous, his fellow shipmates throw him overboard, which is where the big fish comes in.

Eventually he’s disgorged onto shore by the fish and told again to go to Nineveh, which is when we find him in today’s reading. It’s worth asking why Jonah is so reluctant to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the kingdom of Assyria, what was probably the first great super power in the world. Assyria mowed down its enemies, actually victims because it’s not as though there were political or ideological differences between them. The victim countries were just in the way of Assyria’s expansion, so they were absorbed into the empire. Jonah hated them, along with most in Israel I imagine. He certainly didn’t want to warn them of God’s coming judgment in the off-chance they might change their ways and be spared. Which they did. And they were.

The Ninevites changed their path immediately when they heard Jonah’s very cryptic message. He barely needed to say anything, he practically whispers it, and they responded instantly. No arguments, no questions, no preparation to avoid defeat; they just repent. And because they do, God also repents.

Now, that was exactly what Jonah was trying to avoid. He did not want these people let off the hook. He wanted them destroyed. And even though the Ninevites’ repentance is the focus of our reading today, it’s not really the focus of this story. Nineveh is just a foil. What this story is about is the need for Jonah to change. This story calls into question a belief that *our* enemies must necessarily be *God’s* enemies. It challenges us to risk unleashing God’s presence in the world through our actions, through gestures of compassion and generosity even when we’re convinced certain people don’t deserve it.

Jonah's story holds a mirror up to Israelite society at a time when its leaders were trying very hard to establish order, to identify who to accept and who to reject—who's in and who's out.

We can relate a bit to that reality, I think. We hear about those kinds of distinctions being made all the time these days. Lately we've heard about rules around gender identity, especially in the lives of children and youth, trying to govern what parents can do for their children and seeking to establish binary options for people who live on a continuum. Simplistic assumptions aren't helpful for people navigating complexities beyond their control. And ostracizing them, especially children, in the name of order and propriety can do immense harm. When we're called to embrace them and share their struggle, Jonah's story cautions us against running away; it calls us to repent and consider a new path.

But immediate response to that call is really pretty rare. The story from Mark's gospel about Jesus recruiting his first disciples sounds fairly unlikely to our ears. There are a couple of oddities in that story worth looking at. First, who are these people Jesus calls? What are their credentials, exactly, to be disciples? Teachers in that era and in that part of the world tended to be pretty choosy about their students. It was an honor to be chosen to study under a master, and possible candidates were at the very least literate. Chances are, the men in those boats were not literate. They had no reason to learn how to read since their futures were pretty well set by their family businesses. We have to be careful not to impose 21st century values around social mobility on 1st century people. Having the good fortune to have been born into a family that owned a boat and had a business was probably enough to make most men happy.

Yet, Jesus goes to these people who have no reason financially to follow him and no skills to offer the kind of life he's inviting them to lead. I've often imagined that these were not the only fishermen Jesus called. I have this image of Jesus walking along the lakeshore shouting at anyone within earshot to come follow him. Most of them were probably happy where they were. There's nothing wrong with that. Jesus needed followers who were able to take serious risks with their lives. He needed people who were open to adventure.

And for reasons we never learn, Andrew and Peter, James and John were willing and eager to take that risk. They were, apparently, itching to take a new path with their lives. So, they dropped everything, jumped out of their boats (I assume they were close to shore) and hitched themselves to Jesus. In that moment they began a transformation it would take them years to complete. When we jump onto that new path, unprepared and unaware of what lies ahead, it takes us a while to get our footing. The stories of the disciples don't make a straight line from the boats to the cross. They have a lot to learn, and they will lose their way from time to time; maybe even consider abandoning Jesus' path entirely.

But the alternative, staying in their boats and keeping to the path they're on, isn't tolerable anymore. Once exposed to the possibilities Jesus offers, going back just doesn't make any sense. We know, because we know the whole story, that Jesus offers them a path of compassion and justice their old lives could not provide. They were stuck harvesting fish, eking out a living that put them in conflict with all the others who were doing the same thing. Jesus

offers them a new path that would allow them to walk alongside others who were struggling and share that struggle the way Jesus would with them.

What Jesus is offering the disciples is really no different from what the story of Jonah is offering Israelite society. It's a chance to reimagine who we are in relation to God and who God is in relation to us. We like to believe that God is always on our side, and we're not wrong about that. But for God it's not a zero-sum game. Being on our side doesn't prevent God from being on the side of those we consider our enemies. That's a truth Jesus will teach his disciples over and over again. When the religious authorities chastise him for consorting with prostitutes and tax collectors and other sinners, he'll remind them such people are also God's children and he'll embrace them no matter what.

The new path Jesus invites his disciples to walk, invites you and me to walk, is one that lets go of simplistic categories. No matter what people say or even do we cannot assume they are beyond redemption. At times walking the path of compassion requires us to just listen to others' frustrations and expressions of hatred. Other times it will mean opposing them and challenging such views even if we don't think it will make much difference. And like the disciples, as eager as we may be to begin, we'll often get it wrong. We'll say hurtful things or dismiss their humanity.

I'm convinced over the next year we may have many opportunities to practice compassion toward people whose views we find abhorrent. That might be at a march or a prayer vigil or across the dinner table in our homes. It's easy to fall into a destructive pattern, like Jonah, and wish only the worst on those whose views we find repellant or dangerous. Yet, God calls us to be in relationship with them nonetheless. God calls us to the way of compassion and grace, to leave the security of our boats behind and risk our safety, even, for the sake of Christ. We can't ignore it and we can't run from it. We can only resolve to commit ourselves to the path Jesus walks, to stand alongside those who are targets of scorn and disdain, to love every neighbor as ourselves and reveal the presence of God through our embrace.

Another lesson from Jonah we might take to heart is, in spite of our resistance to God's call, God never quits calling. As the choir reminded us, "Jesus call us, o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea. Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying 'Christian, follow me.'" If the gospel of compassion and grace is going to survive in a tumultuous world filled with vindictiveness and anger, it will have to be through us. Take the path of love, my friends, no matter how hard it becomes and trust it to bring you, and all of us, home.

Amen