

“The Changing of Minds”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:14-20

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

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our minds, our hearts, our imaginations, and our faith to You, and to the power and mystery of Your spirit. I pray that You would take the words and images that we carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard proclaimed out of scripture from Jonah and Mark, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the Living Word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us. Let that word feed our faith, comfort our hurts, challenge our comforts, and guide us in all that we do and all that we say. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

So there are two threads that hold these two passages together, in a sense. The first thread is the idea of repentance that comes from the gospel of Mark, which means to change your understanding, change your outlook, change your course, change your life based on circumstances, basically, be willing to give up that which you hold sacred and are convinced that is true in order for your life to be more responsive to the reality that's at hand. There's that thread in Mark which sort of ties into the story of Jonah and how the people in Nineveh are invited to change their point of view, if you will. The second is that Jesus calls His

followers, these fishermen who are by the sea. He says, "Follow Me" and immediately, it seems, they just lay down everything and follow Jesus. The sense of call and response, a vocational response that people have to Jesus and to the presence of God that's residing within Him.

Again, this ties into the Nineveh passage, the Jonah passage, in the sense that Jonah is called specifically by God to go to Nineveh and to tell them that God is going to wipe them out because of their evil behavior. And many of you know this story, in the first chapter of Jonah, God says, "Go and tell them that they better get their act together or else," and Jonah said, "You know what? I am not going to Nineveh. They're not going to listen to me. They're not going to believe anything that I say. So instead, I'm going to get on a boat and go the other way." And so he gets on a boat and he goes the other way and they're sailing across the sea, and a huge storm comes up and he's been talking to people about what God has laid on his heart and how he is rejecting it, and so sailors come to him and say, "Is this your fault?" And he's like, "Well, it could be" and they're like, "Well, it could be our fault. It could be your fault." So they draw straws to see whose fault it is and, of course, Jonah gets the short straw. It's his fault. And he says to them, "Okay, it's my fault. Throw me overboard." Just exactly what all of us would do, right? The plane is kind of sputtering and what--"Hey, it's my fault. Just throw me out." So he gets thrown out and then this big fish - also known as the Grace of God, that's a whole other sermon - a big fish comes and swallows Jonah. He lives there. He prays. He hopes that God will hear his prayers of repentance and, finally, the fish lays him upon the beach [laughter].

He's fine. He decides it's time so he walks through Nineveh. People are kind of like, "What's that smell?" and they're like, "It's Jonah." And he tells them that they've got 40 days to get their act together. Now, the people of Nineveh are a little bit freaked out when he's telling them 40 days because - we didn't pick this up in our English bible - but Jonah is the name Noah turned inside out in Hebrew. So the Ninevites -- they know the story, right, of the bible. There's enough people of Israel around the Assyrian city of Nineveh. They know these stories. And people start talking to each other, gossip starts spreading, and everyone in Nineveh is convinced that if they don't get their act together, there's got to be a gigantic flood that wipes them off the face of the earth. Even the king believes this and so he calls for a period of fasting. Everyone is putting on sackcloth. They're sitting in ashes. They're praying, "God, please don't do anything." And I want to translate this in my language, not in our NRSVs, so please excuse me. When God saw what these non-believing pagans did, how they turn from their evil ways and embrace the message that Jonah was offering them, by repenting of their sin, because God saw this, God changed God's mind. And God decided, "You know what? I am not going to wipe them out because they have listened. They have responded faithfully." Jonah made the call, they responded. There it is. God said, "Okay. I'm going to let them live."

A part of me just want to stop there and say that again, and again, and again. Because of the cry of the people, God changed God's mind. I don't know about you but I know what times in my life I've been convinced that God is the watchmaker who's created every dial, and every spring, and every sprocket, and every arm, and every number, and placed it all perfectly in the universe, and wound it up, and let it go, and knows exactly how everything is going to happen. And maybe God does still, I'm not sure. But it seems odd to me that God would listen to a bunch of pagans who've said, "Oh, you know what? That Jonah guy is right." And I wonder what it means for us, in our prayer lives, not just as individuals but maybe even more importantly, as people of a church, or even a denomination, or even just Christians in general. If we pray to God, will God change God's mind about things? Now, thankfully, I don't know too many prophets, so I don't know the doom and gloom that's about to come our way that we need God to change God's mind about. I mean, there is all that, right, in the Old Testament. But the point I'm trying to lift up is that God is responsive to the activity of a pagan people, and God changed God's mind because of their activity. All of these sets up what happens in the Gospel of Mark because Jesus shows up as soon as John is arrested. He's in the northern city of Galilee, proclaiming the Good News and He walks around saying, the time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the Good News.

In a sense, this could be the same message or a similar message that Jonah delivered. The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and trust in the Good News or trust in what's going to happen. But Jesus is saying the same things, and what I want to do now is just pick those four little movements apart a little bit and invite us to think about what that means for us in the sense of God changing God's mind and then call and response. Jesus' presence is the most important thing at this first part of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is there. He is walking around, he's talking to people, and he's telling them that now's the time. The Kingdom of God is here. So repent and believe in the Good News. In a sense, Jesus' very presence is that presence of God, right? We all know that. We all trust that. We all believe that. But what I want to push towards is this idea that not only is Jesus that presence of God, but that you and I are that presence now. That you and I are the ones walking around in a fulfilled time, and we may not be walking around telling people to repent. I mean none of us want to be that person, right? But if we walked around with that presence like Jesus had, maybe we can do good in this world, maybe we can offer peace or offer hope, maybe we can offer the Good News to someone who's really, really hurting, and maybe God will change God's mind because of what we do, or maybe someone else will change their mind. Maybe someone who's convinced that God doesn't care about them, God doesn't love them, God doesn't even notice them, will come to realize through your action that God is real and present in you.

And here I go back to one of my classic images of what it means to be a Christian today. Take a bottle of wine, walk across the street, and say hello to the neighbor that you haven't met yet. It's that simple. When I read the first part of it where it says repent and this whole idea of changing your direction, changing your understanding, changing how you see the world, being in a sense allowing yourself to be pulled inside out by the Good News, it clicked for me back to the story that we heard not too long ago from Luke about the angels showing up where the shepherds are watching their folks at night. And after the shepherds are terrified, the angel says, "No, no, no, no. Don't be afraid, for see, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. That this good news is that Jesus has been born among us. God's very presence has been born among us. And now, through the craziness of life and faith and the working of the Spirit, God's very presence lives among us through us. So Jesus is walking around, saying all these things. He's talking to people. He comes along to some fisherman. He says, "Follow me. I will make you fish for people and immediately they left their nets and they followed Jesus.

If you pull this sort of-- if you pull the lens back from this story and you think that Jesus is trying to form a church and he's trying to find special people, if you think Jesus is just walking around sharing the kingdom and saying, "Follow me," and these people come, it's important to realize, he says, "I will make you fish for people." They're fishermen who are going to fish for people. He does not say, "I'm going to make you the pope or cardinal or bishop." I'm not going to make you executive presbyters. I'm not even going to make you clergy or deacons or elders, I am going to make you fishermen for people. And of course they left their nets and followed and did all those things, but what I want to offer to us is the idea that maybe God's call to each of us is not a call to leave behind who we are or what we do, but it is in fact to embrace who we are and what we do and to embrace it to the point of going backwards to realizing that we need to understand that God's power and love and mercy and grace is now alive in us. So Jesus is saying to all of us, "Follow me and I will make you a grandmother for people or a grandfather for people or a teacher for people or a cop for people or a banker or a lawyer or a doctor or a nurse. Whatever it is you do, whoever you are, I'm going to make you be you for people." And don't we all know in our hearts that when we authentically show up when someone we love or care about is hurting that that is the best thing we can offer them? Just our presence.

For way too long the notion of call or vocation has meant that somehow God reaches into the mire and pulls out someone and makes them special. And the church does everything to continue to sort of lay that image before us. How much higher am I than you? I'm up here and you're down there. We get to wear black robes and stoles, you don't. Now I'm not going to give up the stole, the robe, or the high pulpit, right?

Because that's not who we are. But the idea is we reinforce a message that is not reformed. In our reformed faith all of us are priests. We're the priesthood of all believers. And that priesthood is meant to be lived out in our ordinary, daily lives, that we take that holy sacredness and we live it into our ordinary, daily lives. So I want to conclude with a story that I ran across this week that captures the essence of this. There was a young woman who-- all the way through high school she was in youth group. And then she went away to college and she was in a Christian club, a fellowship club at school. And in high school and in college everyone that ever sort of paid attention to anything that she did would go up to her and say, "You are called to ministry. You're going to be a pastor." She could stand and speak beautifully, very authoritative, very engaging, knowledgeable about scripture. She was involved in all kinds of service opportunities for the less fortunate. I mean, everything she did just sort of smelled and looked and felt like Jesus stuff. And everyone was telling her this.

And one break she was at home and she went in to meet with her pastor and she asked her, "Everyone that I'm around right now is telling me that I'm going to go into the ministry. What do you think?" And her pastor very lovingly looked at her and said, "Your call is to simply follow God's desire. What is that desire that God has placed inside of you?" She said, "I'm pretty sure I want to teach third grade." And the woman who usually wears the stole and the robe on Sundays very, very wisely said, "Go and do. I am convinced that you will touch more lives in the classroom than you ever will in a church." And so she did. Each of us have that sense -- that opportunity of being called to do what we're already doing. The question is, can we change our understanding to realize that we in fact carry the essence, the goodness, the grace of God? And our job is to share it. Amen.