

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“A Surprising Turn of Events”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 24, 2021

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.

Jonah 3:1-10

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 the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”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.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, your word is the living word. It speaks to us in time and throughout time. So be with us now as we wrestle with your word for us this day, in Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

I just finished reading a book called *The Vanishing Half*, and it touched on some of the issues raised in my sermon this morning. So, I will begin by saying to Maggie Albers and all those reading this book, spoiler alert,

because I'm going to share some of the plot, and I'm going to apologize in advance, but still, I'm going to do it. The book itself is the story of twins who are suddenly separated. In the beginning of the book, we learn of the two. Desiree is more adventuresome than her sister, Stella. But as different as they are, they are still incredibly close. Desiree wants to leave their small Louisiana town, so small it's not even found on a map, but still it is not. But finally, after years of pestering her, Desiree finally convinces Stella to take the plunge with her. And so one night, when the whole town is at an annual celebration, they head out of town for the big city. The new world they find in New Orleans is not as fun as they had hoped, but they persevere, and they work in a laundry and make their way to getting their own apartment. But when Stella gets fired from the job and finds a new one in a department store, Stella's life begins to change. And one day Stella packs up and leaves. Desiree knows not where she has gone. She's heartbroken and feels lost without the twin that she has been with night and day all of her life. And she's shocked because it's the shy of the two. She didn't think Stella would ever make such a move.

Desiree tries to find her for a long time but to no avail, and the years passed, she meets a man, gets married and tries to start her life anew. But in time, it becomes apparent he is an abusive man. And after the birth of her daughter, she realizes she must leave. There's no place to go except back to Mallard. So, she goes home. When she gets there, her mother is of two minds. Understandably, she is hurt and angry and keeps Desiree at a distance, not wanting to be hurt by her again. But she also goes day by day with her, recognizing she has returned home. Time moves on and Desiree creates a life there and raises her daughter and her mother and she became reconciled. But at the back of her mind, Desiree is still wondering where's Stella, she feels hurt, sad and angry.

In other chapters of the book, we learn about Stella's life, one of great wealth but always living in fear of the past being discovered. Their lives are separate for a long time, but they begin to move closer and close and one day their paths cross. But Stella's sudden appearance does not bring an easy joy. Desiree is angry she doesn't want to welcome her with open arms. The fear of being hurt again and the inclination to punish Stella for what has happened fills her heart. The possibilities for reconciliation, anger, hope, and rejection all exist in that moment and we witness her struggle and challenge to forgive.

I think if we're honest, we have maybe had similar moments of challenge or struggle in our own lives. Whether it's with forgiveness or repentance, difficult times when events, people, or changes come that bring with them division and hurt. And we struggle, whether it is by the actions of others or those we may have hurt.

In the Bible, prophets are called by God to speak truth and challenge sin. Prophetic voices call people to repent and come back to God. Isaiah and Jeremiah are very familiar to us as major prophets, Amos and Hosea, the minor ones. Most of these books of the prophets are based on real people, written and connected to real events. When God yearns to have the people of God repent and turn back, what we learn from those prophets is that God's end goal is not to punish, but to reconcile, to make things right. The call of the prophet comes not only for judgment, but to call people back to God. It is not supposed to end in judgment, but reconciliation when we repent and return. And it follows then that this is one of the books, the book of Jonah, that is read on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur in Jewish temples or synagogues.

That's the challenge that Jonah faces in this morning's scripture reading. His story is a strange one that intrigues

us. The image of being swallowed by a whale conjures up all kinds of things, especially when he gets spit out again white as snow, but as they say, right as rain. The book though, is not viewed as one that talks about a real person, but about the real nature of God, God's call to repentance, and the wideness of God's mercy. Scholars note that there are outlandish and sometimes humorous parts of the story used to make a point and sort of reflect to us that this is more of a story or a tale than real life being reported. Swallowed by a whale, a vicious storm that Jonah sleeps through, and the like. But while it's a created story, it makes a very real point about the nature of God, the desire and nature of God to bring people back to faithful living. This is a call that is extended in this story even to the enemies of the Jewish people, and a story that lays the groundwork for Jesus who comes and speaks of the love of God for all people.

It's interesting to contrast this reading with the gospel reading this morning. In that reading that Tom read, it appears Jesus says the word and that those people are ready to go, leaving behind fishing gear and boats, their daily lives. They are willing to follow Jesus, at first call, as though they've been sitting around waiting for him to arrive. So maybe Jonah's response is one that we can relate to more easily because he runs in the other direction. He's not interested. He's unsettled by the call of God. Jonah doesn't want to help the enemies be forgiven. Jonah doesn't want to share God's mercy. He wants them to be punished.

So, remember the story and how it comes about. God calls Jonah to go to the land of Nineveh, a people long considered to be enemies and sinful. It might be as if one of us today was asked to go and preach repentance to those of ISIS. It would be hard to fathom and hard to accept. So, on one level, who can blame him? The Ninevites had been violent and inflicted a great deal of pain on Jonah's people. He wouldn't and he couldn't trust them. And his response is, "Why? It's a waste of time. And why should they be forgiven? They don't deserve it."

So, Jonah gets on a boat going in the other direction, but God won't have it. God is persistent. Even the nonbelievers on board know there is something amiss, because when the storm comes up and they throw lots, it's Jonah who gets pushed overboard. And it's interesting to note that the humor exists in this as well. Dagon was the fish god of the Ninevites and worshipped by them in that country. It's Jonah who was swallowed by a whale. Jonah prays in the belly of that whale and finds himself thrown up by the whale right on the shores of Nineveh. And now he's stuck.

God calls him again to tell the people to repent. So, Jonah gets up reluctantly and proceeds to walk all around the city. He certainly doesn't act like the typical evangelist on a street corner, challenging and provoking people to respond in a loud, demanding voice. I have this sense of him solemnly walking around the city, calling people, muttering or with a lackluster voice, calling them to repent if they want to. It's as if he's saying, "They aren't going to hear this news if it's good news, by golly, not from me, at least not very loudly."

You see, Jonah knows of God's desire for repentance and penchant for mercy. Jonah doesn't refuse to go because he thinks it's a waste of time, but because he doesn't want them to repent. He doesn't like them and what they've done to his people, and he doesn't want to forgive them. He wants them to suffer. He doesn't want them to know the goodness of God's mercy and grace because they don't deserve it. But to his amazement and consternation, the people hear the message, and they respond. The king repents, and in turn, he calls his people to repent. And in a continuation of that odd, humorous note of this book, he even calls the animals to repent, not to eat, not to drink water.

Now, you might think that Jonah would rejoice at his success and pat himself on the back, but that's not the case. They've lived out his fear. They've repented. And Jonah is peeved, angry, sulking and sullen, and he sits under a broom tree and whines, wishing he were dead. Now, one might think God would just roll God's eyes, leave him to pout and say, "He'll come to his senses." But God doesn't leave Jonah. God finds him and talks with him, speaks to him like a sulking child, but also with tenderness and understanding. As if God said, "I know it isn't what you wanted, but you know well, I am the God of mercy and grace. As you yourself said, I am a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing." God lives out exactly what Jonah already knows but does not want to accept. In this book, something different is added. It opens up the power and meaning of God's grace and reconciliation even more widely. For we learn that God is not willing only to forgive Jonah's people, but all people. God knows that Jonah resents the forgiveness and that as a human, Jonah needs time to accept what God has done.

And that's what happens in this book about the twins, Desiree and Stella. When they finally come face to face, Desiree is hurt and angry and not interested at all in reconciliation. She literally tries to keep her at arm's length. But when Stella says over and over, "Forgive me, please forgive me," the wall begins to crumble, the wall of hurt and anger. Reconciliation begins. It's not a fairy tale ending where everything is just fine from that moment forward, but there's a sense of movement day to day. It takes time and some of the anger and resentment begins to fade.

I think we see in these stories that God offers mercy more profoundly than we are often able to, and that's because God's purpose is not to stop a judgment, it's to culminate in reconciliation, something that is in the nature of God and God is far more easily able to do it than we are because God is the source of all love. And yet God knows, too, we are human and we struggle with our hurts and our sorrow and our pain in very human ways.

What I also find meaningful is how the story of Jonah leads to help us understand what a radical statement it is that God sent Jesus for everyone, everywhere. We see it in the ways that Jesus lives out his life, offering the woman who anointed his feet a place among the men in the room, or the woman at the well, the gift of faith, much to the amazement, I might add, of the disciples, the tax collector who starts to follow and forgiving even those very eager disciples we read about this morning when they are in the locked room following his resurrection.

We are reminded that there are times when God's willingness to offer mercy flies in the face of our very human desires for punishment towards those who have hurt us, a desire that others should not get away with being forgiven so easily. In some cases, the forgiveness from God will be all that another experiences, and it will have to be enough. And it will not keep from the punishment that they might have to incur because of their actions in the world of justice. But they are still given the assurance that God's mercy is offered, a gift of assurance and love when they repent.

Mercy is messy. There are things in life that happen that we find hard to let go of and forget, but time can heal many wounds, especially if we're open to the possibility. And sometimes in the face of horrific events, God will be the only one able to offer mercy to those who repent of such actions when others struggle because it is too raw

or painful. What we may need to become reconciled with then is that God's mercy will be avail to those who repent, even if we're not ready to do the same.

Mercy is messy, but it is what God yearns to offer to those who repent, and that may have to be enough. That may be what helps those who hurt others begin to heal. There may be times we will have to accept a less than perfect ending, but still gain some healing by letting go of the anger or by coming to know that someone has honestly changed, even if they will no longer be part of our lives. Time can be that gift and God's gift of love is rooted in all of this. Remember what is said in the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that God sent his only son not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." And so, in the end, for all of us, it is important to remember judgment is not where God yearns to end the story. God yearns for us to turn around and come back home. Amen.