

Jonah 3:1-10 ~ Mark 1:14-20  
*Now is the Time: Jesus' Call to Action (Part 1)*  
*Not Those People!?*  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany ~ January 24, 2021  
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Gospel Lesson:*

It's January 24<sup>th</sup>: How is your 2021 reset going so far? Did you make any New Year's resolutions that are still in play? If you took on the increasingly popular "Dry January" resolution and are still at it, well done you! Good news, only one more week to go. Jesus burst on the scene to reset the world. Our Gospel lesson this morning contains his first words and first actions he said and did to begin his earthly ministry I am calling today, his reset. And it is Good News, really Good News, for all of us— wherever we may be with our 2021 resolutions at this moment.

*Sermon:*

God can be annoying. Probably not what you expect to hear your pastor say, but let's be honest. We may laugh at Jonah's cartoonish resistance: His running as fast as he could away from Nineveh. Bolting in the exact *opposite* direction from where God told him to go. Trying to sleep through the storm, willing his own death more than once, being swallowed by a large fish, preaching the worst sermon in the history of sermons, then being angry at the Ninevites' for their wholesale turn around, and even angrier at God's compassion for the people and the animals of Nineveh.

But if you look at it from Jonah's point of view, isn't God the one who is truly annoying? In the story we had last week, the prophecy God gave to the boy Samuel that night in the temple in Shiloh was very bad news for Eli and for the people of Israel. The news there was impending punishment and doom that would and did happen. And that devastation was inflicted on God's chosen people. Not even extreme sacrifice or offering could change the punishment God would exact upon his own people. And now God is ready to extend grace to 120,000 *Ninevites*? They were despised evil enemies of Israel. How annoying is that?

We are told in verse 10, "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 did not do it." Is that the moment when God's change of mind really began? If you think about it, I think God's turn toward mercy for the people of Nineveh begin with God's call to Jonah. That's how the story begins in Jonah 1:1-2, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city and cry against it; for their wickedness has come before me."

If we find Jonah's attitude annoying, and God's mercy also annoying, what is the lesson, what is the divine invitation for us here? Where is the Good News? As we

know, after all the antics that make this “whale of a tale” so delightful and comical, reluctant Jonah *does* what God called him to do and all the Ninevites, from the king to all the people to all the animals, repent. Author, teacher, scholar, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, sums it up in this way, “The lesson is Jonah is that nothing is written, nothing is sealed: God’s will itself may change. Even though punishment has been programmed, it may be cancelled. Therein lies the beauty and the grandeur of Jewish tradition: every human being is granted one more chance, one more opportunity to start his life all over again. Just as God has the power to begin, man has the power to continue by beginning again—and again.”<sup>i</sup>

I believe God gives that power to all of us. To you and to me. To those we love and to those we hate. I’m not sure which is more annoying, God pushing us out of our comfort zones, no matter how hard we try to run away from God. Or God loving the people we hate. As much as God loves us. This may feel like bad news, annoying news, if we leave it there. But both of our scripture lessons and the entire Bible will not let us do that. As Elie Wiesel points out: the invitation, the challenge, and the comfort are all wrapped up in the word, “repent.”

Calling the people of Nineveh to “repent” was the catalyst for sending Jonah to Nineveh, and in Mark, it is the first declarative verb that Jesus utters in his first proclamation of his earthly ministry. Yes, we heard the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Mark 1.15: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; **repent** and believe in the good news.”

Let’s think about that pesky word, “repent.” It’s probably one we have a sort of love/hate relationship with. For many of us, it makes us think about feeling bad and sorry for our sins. Repent is what we do when we have messed up and fallen short in God’s eyes. But the biblical meaning of repent is not primarily contrition, but resolve. In the Jonah passage, the Hebrew word, *shuv*, means primarily to return to God. Baked into the Hebrew meaning is the metaphor of return from exile, to reconnect with God. In the New Testament, the Greek word *metanoia* continues to have this meaning—adding to it repentance as following the way of Jesus: The path of dying and rising, as the way of return.

However, Marcus Borg teaches us in his book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life of Faith*, the Greek word for repent, (*metanoia*) has an additional nuance that combines to mean “to go beyond the mind that you have.” When I first read this, back in 2006 on the shores of Flathead Lake in Northwest Montana, that big Montana sky opened in a whole new way for my heart, soul, and yes, mind. “Go beyond the mind that you have been given and have acquired. Go beyond the mind shaped by culture to the mind you have “in Christ.” It is the path of reconnection, the path of transformation, the way of being born again, the path of response to the message of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>ii</sup>

Here's the thing: yes, "*metanoia*" can be annoying. Most of us, most of the time would rather stick with the mind we have, the mentality that we know and understand. It's familiar. Even if we are just about ready to give up on ourselves. Like Jonah, he was suicidal more than once, most of us can relate to that feeling of internal desperation. But changing, going beyond the mind we have seems harder, if not impossible. Or even if we are ready to give up on a relationship that is giving us fits. It's just too hard. We just keep making the same mistakes, having the same arguments again and again. But move beyond the relationship we have? Come on, God that seems harder if not impossible. Or even if we are just about ready to give up on our country. We are so divided. We just can't see how the other 75-80 million Americans see our nation and what is needed, so very differently than we do. Can our nation go beyond the mind and habits it currently has?

Are you feeling today like, "enough is enough?" What are we waiting for? After over 400,000 COVID deaths; after the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor; after 2020 tied with 2016 for the warmest year on record, continuing our planet's long term warming record; after the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6; after the inauguration of our new duly elected leaders, what are we waiting for? If we are waiting for God, God is the one who says, the time is now. "Go at once! Yes, to Nineveh. Jesus says, "Follow me!" And Mark tells us they went, immediately. No hesitation. Simon and Andrew left their nets; James and John left their father, their secure livelihood, their security, their known world, immediately.

What do we need to let go of? What are we holding on to perhaps as a life raft that is really an undertow threatening to drag us under? Maybe one thing we need to let go of is our disregard for "those people." Those Ninevites. Those foreigners. They are not like us. And worse than that, they are our enemies. Those Assyrians that crushed us in battle. Belittled and scorned us. Why should I care if they are going to be destroyed? Who are *your* Ninevites? Who are your "those people." We all have them. They may be a group of people whom we have never met. Or they may be people in our own extended families. "Those people" may be co-workers, or people who live down the block with signs in their front yards that proclaim their political alliance that you oppose. How can they think like that?

According to Michael North, an assistant professor at NYU's Stern School of Business, stereotypes in general—both negative and positive—serve us because they help us take cognitive shortcuts. By giving us a way to "automatically categorize people into social groups, they let us free up mental energy to live our lives. Left unquestioned, however, they harden into bias than can quickly become a substitute for reality." I read about this in Barbara Brown Taylor's excellent book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, which our Open Book Group discussed on Thursday. She continued with a sentence that has become a new challenge for me. "Anytime you hear yourself thinking or saying something about "those people" you

know your stranger Geiger counter has gone off.”<sup>iii</sup> In the context of this sermon, I would add, anytime you hear yourself or someone else saying something about “those people” quickly say to yourself, “those people are the ones who God loves as much as God loves me. Yes, enough to die on the cross for.”

Don’t get me wrong. There is definitely a place and a purpose for righteous anger. However, does our anger justify denying our enemies the opportunity for repentance and reconciliation? God is telling us here: No, it does not. We learn from Jonah, we learn from Jesus: vengeance may feel good, but it is not justice. Anger may fire up our focus and call us to action, but anger alone is not justice either.

I will close with a word from Sister Joan Chittister OSB, Benedictine spiritual author and lecturer from her book, *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*. I hear this urgent call to action in God’s call to Jonah and Jesus’ call to Simon, Andrew, James and John. Sister Joan puts it like this: “The call today is for all of us to realize that the prophetic tradition has been handed on to each of us to reclaim. The world needs all of us, each of us now, to take our place with Jesus on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, so that no one’s needs and no one’s pain is overlooked on the way.”<sup>iv</sup>

That’s right Sister, no one’s. Not even the pains and the needs of “those people.”

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<sup>i</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits, Saul-Jonah-Jeremiah, Elijah-Joshua*, (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, London, 1981), p.151.

<sup>ii</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today*, (HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, CA, 2003), p.180.

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY, 2019), p.197

<sup>iv</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, (Convergent: New York, NY, 2019), p.105.