

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20, Psalm 62:6-14

Some Sunday Lectionary readings make it very easy to find a preaching theme. Sometimes there is even an embarrassment of riches where there are almost too many important themes and it gets hard to decide “Which one should I pick.”

For most of the past week that didn’t feel like the case with the readings we’re about to hear. I struggled all week trying to come up with some important lesson for us based on these readings, and I have to admit, it was tough.

At first, these readings seemed so boring.

In the 1st reading, the prophet Jonah goes to a big city, shouts “Repent” at everyone, and they repent, and everyone is happy.

In the 2nd reading, St. Paul sounds like one of those embarrassing street people shouting “The End of the World is nearly here” – “Drop the wedding plans, the End is Nigh.”

Even the Gospel seemed pretty basic and boring: Jesus sees 4 fishermen and says “Come, follow me, and they do. The End”.

None of those stories seem to compare with the fabulous rendition we heard in Lady Gaga’s Nation Anthem, or her magnificent dress. But sometimes big messages are hidden in little details. The “Book of Jonah is only 4 pages long. It tells a story of a Jewish prophet who didn’t really want to be a prophet. God called him to go to a huge city of Nineveh. Jonah and most Jewish people hated Nineveh because the people of Nineveh were responsible for the Jewish exile and extortion of his people.

Jonah didn’t want anything good to happen to the Ninevites. It would be like God telling me to go preach love and forgiveness in Mara Lago or telling you to go convert a Republican Convention.

Yet, Jonah reluctantly agrees. He gets on a boat and heads to Mara Lago/Nineveh, and he was probably relieved a storm threw him overboard where he was swallowed by a whale for 3 days, at least it got him out of going to Nineveh. But the whale spat him up close to Nineveh. So, God again tells him to go into wicked Nineveh and tell them to repent of their idolatry and love God.

Jonah didn’t believe it would ever work. I suspect he hoped they wouldn’t repent because he wanted to see God destroy the Godless heathen Ninevites. He seems a bit gleeful of announcing their doom- “You have 40 days to change your minds or God will destroy and obliterate your wicked city!”

Here, we must remember what that baggage laden word “Repent” means, it’s such a violent word really in the mouths of Hell-Fire preachers. “Repent” vs “Metanoia” – Greek for “Change your minds.”

I wonder if Jonah was disappointed that the people of Nineveh heard his message declared a fast, put on sackcloth, and prayed that God would forgive them. It obviously wasn't as horrible as Jonah hoped. It turns out they were horrified to find out God felt they had cheated on him. They find out God felt they had cheated on him. They repented and then something truly incredible happened, something deeply relevant to us and to them. The Scripture says "When God saw what they did, how they turned away from their evil ways, God repented, he changed his mind and didn't overthrow the enemy."

So many lessons for us in that: The people we hate, our enemies who we believe are unredeemable, might just be waiting to be asked to change their minds. Maybe, what they once thought was right or good wasn't what they hoped it would be and they've just waiting and hoping for a second chance. I wonder if, maybe, the "Make America Great Again" people might eventually be the same once they see themselves painted into their own corners, left outside of a great movement built on love and inclusion of all. Maybe, they're waiting for you or me to be the Jonah inviting them back in.

Their response, unimaginable to Jonah wasn't unimaginable to God who never writes people off and their response was immediate.

And "Immediate is another little word. I'd draw your attention to in this morning's Gospel. Jesus sees Simon, Andrew, Jannes, and John fishing and it says he immediately called them to be Apostles and they immediately dropped their nets and followed him.

There were no interviews, no contracts, no negotiations about Pay or Housing, or Families. It was immediate with Jesus and immediate with them.

In both these readings God calls and people are going to answer in the most unexpected and miraculous ways. Are we so willing to put God before everything?