

**Third Sunday after Epiphany  
(Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

**Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20; I Corinthians 7:29-31**

**Jonah 3:1-10.** This chapter is short (only ten verses) and its message is simple and direct. A chastened Jonah, having been rescued from the belly of the fish, accepts the call earlier issued to him by God and goes to Ninevah, “an exceedingly large city” to proclaim the word of God to it. His message is simple: “Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown” (in Hebrew, that message consists of only five words) (vs. 4). The people and the king hear Jonah’s message, repent in sackcloth and ashes (vs. 8), and God spares them (vs. 10). It’s a simple story, but it is a most profound understanding of the misuse of power and how God can work to transform those seduced by such power.

To understand this story, one must first ask and answer the question, “What was Ninevah?” Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the dominant political and military power in the Middle East from 880 to 620 BCE. They conquered most of the nations along the Fertile Crescent (including Israel) and mercilessly harassed both the kingdoms of Judah and of Egypt. They were a warlike people, and their empire was built as a giant war machine. They were intolerant in religion, forcing each conquered nation to worship their gods. And they were well known for their ruthless cruelty in warfare. An example of the savagery of their attack was stated by Ashur-nasir-pal II, one of their greatest rulers, who wrote in the court records this description of his conquering of one nation:

“I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountain I slaughtered them, with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. With the rest of them I darkened the gullies and precipices of the mountains. I carried off their spoil and their possessions. The heads of their warriors I cut off, I formed them into a pillar outside their city walls, I set the pillar of heads afire, and then their young men and their maidens I burned in that fire”.<sup>1</sup>

The Assyrians were particularly known for psychological warfare. When they would be ready to conquer a nation, their great army would cover the hills and valleys around the capital city. They would then take the highest-ranking soldier of that nation whom they had captured and would skin him alive in front of the city walls. They would hang the skin on a framework so that all on the walls could see it, as the man, writhing in pain, died in front of his own flesh. The Assyrian commander would then give a challenge to the king. He had a choice. Either he could surrender the city and the nation to Assyria and his head would be quickly severed from his body. Or, if he chose to resist, then once the city fell to the Assyrian army, that defending king would then be skinned alive in front of his conquered people.<sup>2</sup> When one reads the account written in II Kings 18:13 – 19:37 and Isaiah 36-37 of how the Rabshakeh (commanding general) of the Assyrian army confronted Judah’s king Hezekiah in front of the city walls with the threat of the city’s (and Hezekiah’s) annihilation and the clear implication that if he did not surrender, Hezekiah would be skinned alive, one can much more profoundly appreciate the degree of faith Hezekiah must

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, two volumes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1926), p. 270, paragraph 447.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 443; see Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 170-171..

have had in God in order to accept the prophet Isaiah's counsel to trust in God to deliver Israel from the Assyrians.

So Jonah preaches his five-word sermon, the Ninevites heed it and repent (3:4-5). When the Assyrian king hears Jonah's message, he is so convicted that he decrees that the king and all his nobles, as well as all the people, are to fast, pray, repent "and turn from (our) evil ways and from the violence that is in (our) hands" (3:6-8). "Who knows?" the king says. "God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (vs. 9).

An intriguing parallel construction occurs at this point with the king's command to his subjects and God's response to that command. It is as follows:

? "All shall turn from their evil ways" (vs. 8)	↔	"God saw how they turned from their evil ways" (vs. 9)
? "God may relent and change his mind" (9)	↔	"God changed his mind" (10)
? "So that we do not perish" (9)	↔	"and he did not do it" (10).

So it was that what the Assyrian king purposed to do to bring his nation to repentance, God honored and "changed his mind" regarding their destruction. Why did God honor the Assyrian repentance? There is an intriguing phrase in this story that reveals why God responded the way he did. The text says, "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*" (vs. 10).

The narrator reports that "God *saw* what they did" in that they "turned from their evil ways" rather than "they acted in good ways". That is, the Assyrians not only repented of their ruthlessness and cruelty. They turned from it! They rejected it! They put it behind themselves! They didn't simply try to do good acts to demonstrate that they had truly repented. They put their evil and ruthless ways behind themselves. That is, God "saw" an inner change of heart in the king, nobles and people of Ninevah, a "violent" rejection of their violence, and therefore God knew that their change in their outward actions were not just a temporary veneer to make themselves appear acceptable to God but a depth change of the very principles and values upon which their society had previously acted (see also Jer. 18:7-8; Exod. 32:12; I Sam. 7:8; II Sam. 24:16; Ezra 8:23; Ps. 90:13; Jer. 36:3,7).

**Psalm 62** is a psalm of trust in God alone. I find its refrain particularly moving.

"For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock; my refuge is in God" (Psalm 62:5-7, also see vss. 1-2).

The message throughout the entirety of this Psalm is God's care of us and, consequently, the necessity for us to trust in him. "Trust in him at all times, O people", the psalmist declares. "Pour out your heart before him. God is a refuge for us" (vs. 8).

And why? Because neither we as individuals nor all of us as a people or a nation are anything to depend upon. We should not be so foolish as to place confidence in ourselves or even in each other. So the Psalmist concludes, “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all, according to their work” (62:11-12).

**Mark 1:14-20** divides into two distinct sections. Verses 14-15 are an introduction to the first portion of the book of Mark. Verses 16-20 tell of Jesus’ call to his first disciples. Let’s consider each section.

“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”.” (1:14-15)

This introductory passage tells us that Jesus began proclaiming the kingdom of God “after John was arrested” (1:14). Thus, with his stepping into the void left by John’s arrest, Jesus is very intentionally taking on the mantle of John. Yet, he is “more powerful than (John)” (1:7), because he is God’s “Son, the Beloved” (1:11), about whom John had prophesied.

This passage is introductory material, but is distinct from the introduction of Mark 1:1-11 that preceded it. Whereas the earlier introduction was of the entire book of Mark, this is an introduction of the first section (1:14-10:52) only. This section centers on Jesus’ ministry, healings, teachings and controversies in Galilee.

The text states that the essential ministry of Jesus was to proclaim “the good news of God”. This is an unusual statement, the only time it appears in scripture. Of course, the word in Greek for “good news” is “gospel”, so either word can be legitimately used here. But the proclamation is of the “gospel of God”, not of Jesus (cf. 1:1). As we pointed out in the exposition of Mark on the Second Sunday of Advent, “the word “gospel” was a technical term for “news of victory”, (especially) for the ascension to power of a new Roman emperor”. Thus, in Jesus’ proclamation of “the good news of God”, he is proclaiming how God has and will act to bring a new monarch – God’s monarch -- to leadership in the world. And this, in turn, sets the theme for this entire section (1:14—10:52). God is acting mightily among humanity (and especially among the poor and powerless) through the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus proclaims, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near” (or, equally possible in the Greek, “is at hand”). The words “fulfilled” and “come near” or “at hand” are in the perfect tense. The perfect tense in Greek was always used to convey an action begun in the past that is being carried on into the present and even beyond the present into the future.

Thus, what Jesus is proclaiming in these words is that the Kingdom of God didn’t initiate with him. The creation of the Kingdom of God began with the very origins of Israel, when Abraham was called out of Ur into the Promised Land and God made covenant with him to bless all the nations of the world through him (Gen. 12:1-3). The nation was actualized through the actions of Moses that liberated the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and formed them into God’s

people in the wilderness. The Kingdom of God was established through the kings and given theological perspective through the prophets. It was contained in the dream of shalom and of Jubilee. And now, with Jesus assuming John's mantle and proclaiming "the good news of God", the Kingdom is now reaching its apex, its high point, its denouement in Him!

The coming of Jesus, Mark is announcing to the reader in 1:14-15, has set into motion all the spiritual forces and the political and economic incentives that will bring about the actualization of the Kingdom of God. Thus, after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, the formation of that kingdom will continue throughout church history until the end time. **This** is now the divine moment, the "kairos" moment for the kingdom when, with the arrival of Jesus, the "gospel" now becomes "gospel" for all the peoples of the whole world, and it becomes actualized in the church!

But how is God's Kingdom actualized? Jesus proclaimed, "Repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15b). To take on the Kingdom in one's own life, in one's family and in one's society requires both repentance and belief. It requires "repentance" of the way we have been seduced by the old order, by a society that prizes control, oppression, exploitation, greed, lust for power, dominance. That was what John proclaimed (1:4). But Jesus goes farther. It also requires "belief in the good news". To embrace God's new order and to allow it to reshape your life in entirety requires to "believe in the good news" it requires "faith" (the same Greek word, *pistis*, is either translated "faith" or "belief"). It requires a heart, mind, soul and body commitment to the new order, an embracing of it not only in one's own life but in all of one's efforts to work for the transformation of human politics, economics, education and values into the "shalom community". God requires repentance, belief and obedience in response to this new "good news".

Mark 1:16-20 is the telling of Jesus' first call to potential disciples to "come, follow me" (1:17). The two call stories of disciples that are presented here and the one that follows in Mark 2:13-14 all follow exactly the same pattern. That pattern is that (1) Jesus moves along the shore, where the people are gathered (1:16a, 19a, 2:13); (2) he meets people doing business and engages them in conversation (1:16b, 19b, 2:13-14); (3) he calls specific individuals among them to follow him (1:17, 20a; 2:14); and (4) these people abandon their workplace and their profession, and follow him (1:18, 20b; 2:14b).

In the story of the challenge given to Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew, Jesus' call is of particular significance. Noting that they are fishermen, and making a play on words, Jesus says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (or better, in the Greek, "fishers of men") (1:17). It is worth to thoughtfully examine this passage because this is one of the most misinterpreted passages in scripture.

In this passage, Jesus is obviously calling these potential disciples into a vocation. But what is that vocation into which they (and we) are being called? Are they being called into an evangelistic task? Or does the term, "fishers of men" have a far more profound meaning than that of winning people to faith (*pistis*) in Christ? To answer this question, we must do what we have repeatedly done in our study of the lectionary. We must ask the question, "What did the term, 'fishers of men', mean to Jews living in the first century A.D.?" And to answer that

question, we must turn to the way this phrase or comparable phrases were used in the Old Testament.

There are only three places in the Hebrew Bible in which this same image was used. Those passages are Jeremiah 16:16, Amos 4:2 and Ezekiel 29:4. In *Jeremiah 16:16*, it is used of Israel's leaders being "caught" by God-appointed "fishermen" and punished for their abuse of power, because of "their iniquity and their sin" (16:18) where they "have filled my inheritance with their abominations".

In *Amos 4:2*, Israel's political, economic and religious leaders and their wives will be taken away into captivity "with hooks" and "with fishhooks", the prophet declares, because they both "oppress the poor and crush the needy" and at the same time, live in conspicuous consumption in front of those they oppress. In *Ezekiel 29:4*, God will "put hooks in the jaws" of Pharaoh king of Egypt and will "draw you up from your channels and fling you into the wilderness" (vss. 4-5) "because you were a staff of reed to the house of Israel; when they grasped you with the hand, you broke, and when they leaned on you, you made all their legs unsteady" (vss. 6-7).

In each of these three Old Testament uses of "fishers of men", judgment comes upon the powerful because they did not use their power to eliminate poverty, to empower the people or to benefit the common good. In each usage, the powerful are criticized for not using their power to move their society toward increasingly becoming the Kingdom of God!

But what does this have to do with these newly called disciples and their vocation of being "fishers of men"? In Mark 1:16-20 is a very intriguing phrase that tells us a great deal about the economic condition of these men and their family businesses. Verse 20 states, "James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat *with the hired men* and followed Jesus". *With the hired men!* The Zebedee Fishing Company had employees! That was an indication that the family of James and John was at least economically "comfortable". They belonged to an independent artisan class of people. They were not day laborers, the peasants or the poor of Israel. It is reasonable to assume that the same would be true of Andrew and Simon. If Levi (Matthew) was indeed a tax collector (as implied in the third call in Mk. 2:14), he would be economically "comfortable" as well. In fact, Jesus was himself a carpenter, which would also make him an independent artisan, possibly working with his father and brothers in the family business. And as we examine the other disciples, the same would be true of them.

Jewish society during the lifetime of Jesus was essentially divided into four levels. Those at the top were the governing class of Gentile and Jewish rulers and the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy. They made up, at most, 2% of the population. With their retainers, they would have been about 7% of the population. Merchants and artisans made up of the second level of society, ranging from highly successful and well-to-do merchants to artisans whose skills made them economically valuable. They made up about 13% of the population. Below them were the peasants who worked the fields of the merchants and landowners and who were employed in the shops of the artisans; they made up about 70% of the population. At the bottom of society were the unclean and the expendables. According to the economic health of the nation at any moment,

those at the bottom could vary between 10% and 20% (when many peasants would fall into the expendable category) of the population.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus and his disciples were primarily made up of the “artisan” class of people. Not many of them were peasants and very, very few would be among either the governing class or the expendables. But the ministry to which Jesus felt called was to the expendables and the peasants of Israelite society! Jesus saw his task as afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. Empowered by the vision of the Kingdom of God – the shalom society of Jubilee that God had intended all Israel (and indeed the entire world) to live under – Jesus set about the task of calling the “artisan” class to follow him in calling Israel back to the practice of a society under God living in justice and equity for all. Thus, Jesus called his followers to be “fishers of men”! As Ched Myers so magnificently put it,

‘Following Jesus requires not just assent of the heart, but a fundamental reordering of social-economic relationships. The first step in dismantling the dominant social order is to overturn the “world” of the disciples: in the kingdom, the personal and the political are one. . . . Thus, this is not a call “out” of the world, but into an alternative social practice’.<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament lesson for today, the Assyrians thoroughly, totally and even “violently” repented of their national sin, and thus were saved. Well, it was this total, thorough, “violent” response on the part of Israel’s political, economic and religious aristocracy for which Jesus was calling. And in the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus was calling his fellow “artisans” to become united in using the influence and power they had to convince Israel’s leadership to embrace the “shalom” society presented throughout the Old Testament! If heathen as evil as the Assyrians could repent, change their ways and commit themselves to building a shalom world, then Israel’s leadership of the first century could do it as well. No nation should live with 2% dominating, controlling and exploiting all the rest – but least of all, God’s nation – Israel. They had been called to far more than that. They had been called to embrace God’s intentions of shaping together a shalom community of justice, equity, elimination of poverty and a vital relationship with God. Now, God was giving them this opportunity. Now, God was calling on them to repent and become that nation, under God, that God always intended them to be. Would the king, the nobles, the people of Israel believe God, repent and turn from their evil ways? Would God see authentic repentance? Or would their actions force God to judge and destroy them and begin to search for a new people?

**I Corinthians 7:29-31** declares, “I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they had no

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<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), Andre Trocme, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Donald Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), pp. 132-133.

possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealing with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.”

“Time is short”. This is a phrase Paul used to impress upon the Christians that the end of the age was near and that they should therefore not be diverted from a highly intentional living out of their call (e.g., 1:7-8; 3:13-15; 4:4-5; 5:5). There is much in life that is attractive – marriage, happiness, possessions, even legitimate sorrow. But all of these, and others as well, can easily divert us from “keeping on keeping on”. We are not to give way to the values of society as corrupted by the lust for power, greed and domination. Jesus called potential disciples to recognize that the dismantling of the dominant social order and the reordering of society with Godly values must begin with one’s self, and one’s own intentional choices. We must choose to live as followers of the Christ and the Christ-way of life, seeking to help form the shalom community in a world given over to injustice and unrighteousness. We must live *in* the world but not be *of* it. For it is only in this way that we can truly become “fishers of men”.

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