

Epiphany 3 – Year B God’s Nature

There’s a story about some folks who were ice fishing. There were two guys fishing together, and they just weren’t catching anything. But not too far away from them, another guy was sitting next to his hole, seeming to pull in one fish after another. The two friends couldn’t figure it out. They were in the same relative place on the lake. They knew how to ice fish as well as anyone, but they weren’t catching anything, and the other guy was. So reluctantly, they walked over to the one catching all the fish and said, “Hey, what’s the secret to catching all the fish?” And the guy mumbled, “[unintelligible].” So they asked again, and the guy said again, “[unintelligible].” So finally, they said, “*What are you saying?*” And the guy said, [first spitting something into his hand] “You gotta keep your bait warm.” You might not remember the sermon, but you’ll remember the bait, eh?

In a podcast I listen to almost every week about the Sunday readings, one of the commentators said she had found the link between the first reading and the Gospel – it was *fishing*. After all, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish before he was pitched out on the shores of Nineveh, and in the gospel, Jesus calls four fishermen as the first disciples. But you know that it is never *that* easy!

We only have a few verses from the book of Jonah this morning. The book is short itself – only four chapters – and it’s not a piece of historical writing, as we define history. But the story is incredibly powerful. It starts off with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh and to “cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” - And Jonah *immediately* takes off in the *opposite* direction. He gets on a boat to sail away, but God riles up the sea and everyone on the boat is going to perish. And Jonah knows why such turmoil is happening. It’s happening because he’s running away from God. So he tells the sailors to throw him overboard. They do, the seas calm, and Jonah is saved from drowning when he is swallowed by a large fish. That’s the end of the 1st chapter. In chapter 2, from inside the fish, Jonah prays – and God has the fish spew Jonah out on the dry land – you guessed it, on the shores of Nineveh. That’s the end of chapter 2, just before the passage we have today. And what we heard this morning is that when God calls Jonah the *second* time, Jonah responds. He does what God asks. He *halfheartedly* walks through Nineveh telling them to repent, and the people respond *immediately!* Even the king of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes, and orders that everyone else do the same. And “when God saw what they did, God changed his mind about wiping them out, and he did not do it.” And that is the end of Chapter 3. But we need to hear the end of the story to know what the real importance of this reading is for us today.

The very next lines in the story, the beginning of Chapter 4, tell us a great deal. “But this was very displeasing to Jonah.” Jonah is angry with God for sparing the people of Nineveh. The Ninevites are *foreigners*, known for their cruelty! And they are the enemies of the Israelites. Jonah does not *want* them to repent and be saved. Essentially, Jonah didn’t want to speak God’s word to the people of Nineveh because he knew God would forgive them. Jonah says, “I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah KNOWS that this is the nature of God... and at that moment, he would have preferred a God who would slay the people Jonah saw as enemies. Instead, God *loves* the people of Nineveh, and calls Jonah to *help* call them to a better way of living, the *way of God*. And I’m reminded of American essayist Garrett Keizer saying, “The thing that makes us the most angry with God... is God’s mercy.”ⁱ

So here is one of our Epiphany moments – the ways, in these Sundays after Epiphany, that the assigned Scriptures attempt to give us insight – Epiphanies – God revealing Godself to us: This story of Jonah tells us that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. And that is how God calls us to treat our enemies; that’s how we are to deal with those with whom we disagree. God’s call to Jonah was to change the way he *saw* the people of Nineveh, to change what he wished for them. This same God who called Jonah is the one who also calls us.

My friend Bob said in his sermon on these readings, “What if the people you have been waiting to see punished are instead loved, and healed and welcomed into [God’s kingdom]? I am fairly confident that the reason we do not see God’s [kingdom] on earth more often than we do is because we all have a bit of Jonah in us. We love God’s grace and mercy when it is shown to us but not so much when it is shown to our enemies. We love God’s invitation to come as we are but are reluctant to issue the same invitation to others.”

And that takes us to today’s Gospel – where Jesus *is* issuing invitations.

The Gospel starts with this: “After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching 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.”” Repent. Jesus preaches the same message that Jonah was to preach to the people of Nineveh – Repent. The same verse from the Common English Bible, the translation used by our Methodist brothers and sisters, puts it this way: “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying, ‘Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!’”

Change your hearts and lives -and trust this good news. Here comes God's kingdom! Now remember from our first reading what that kingdom is like, what the nature of God is like: gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

And then Jesus invites, not the powerful, not the educated religious leaders, but some fishermen, to follow him into that kind of life, where steadfast love and mercy rule, instead of power and oppression. And like the people of Nineveh, these fishermen immediately dropped their nets and followed him.

They left behind whatever was entangling them, and followed. We cannot follow Jesus and not be changed. Or to say it another way, Jesus never leaves us as he found us. That is both consoling and challenging.

We want to say that we will follow, that we will go wherever Christ wants to take us. Michael Renninger says, "But what if Christ said, I want you to go to the ones who hurt you and I want you to love them. Would you go there? I want you to go to your adversaries and help to heal them. I want you to bring them the good news of forgiveness. What if he wants to lead us to that place where we are the ones who take the first step in reconciliation? Would you go there, or would you want to flee?"ⁱⁱ

Those are hard questions. They are the kind of questions asked in the Anthem Eric chose for today – called the Summons. It begins, "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?" – with each verse exposing more of what following might mean, always with the awareness that responding to the call will mean that we will never be the same. – A few years ago, the person who directed our community retreat at Emmaus had us spend the whole weekend just focused on the words of that hymn. Our homework for this week is to print off and keep the bulletin and sit with those words, or listen to the hymn again sometime this week.

Most of us aren't called to leave behind our way of life, like Peter, Andrew, James and John. Even to those fishermen, Jesus issued the call *not to stop fishing* – but to change *how* they were fishing, for what they were fishing. Most of us are called to stay right where we are – but perhaps we *are* told we have to keep the bait warm. We *are* all called to a change of heart and mind that will enable us to see that God loves the people we don't. Yes, God loves the people we hate – and calls us to stop hating them.

We prayed in the opening collect, “Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News...” And the Good News is this: Here comes God’s kingdom! – where God lives – God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love – and who calls us to be the same.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Keizer, Garrett. *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin*. Quoted by Frank G. Honeycutt, *January 4, 2012* Christian Century <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-12/weary-prophet?code=pKXtVLVtsdVd8IGfVEdN>

ⁱⁱ Renninger, Michael. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b09-2-third-sunday-epiphany-year-b/>

- [Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:29-31](#)
- [Mark 1:14-20](#)
- [Psalm 62:6-14](#)