

Third Sunday After Epiphany

January 25, 2009

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Sermon: "Discipleship Means Looking Ahead"

The scriptures highlight for us the need to repent and move forward in one's life. The book of Jonah sends a message to all of us gathered here today. Like Jonah, we are all sent forward into the world to share a message. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to preach and call the wicked people of that city to repent. Reluctantly Jonah went to Nineveh and preached and the people listened and put on the sackcloth of repentance. Even the king of Assyria joins in the fast and repents. It would seem that Jonah was successful,

But, the stubborn prophet of the Lord would not look ahead. He was not happy for the Ninevites. He saw these folks as unworthy of God's grace. He saw them as hated Assyrians (eventually they would come to be known as the Samaritans) who had replaced his people during the exile of 721 B.C. Jonah was unwilling to follow God and look to a future of promise. Given grace and allowed to share in God's redemptive work was not enough for Jonah. There is a sadness to the book of Jonah, for he is unable to comprehend the love and patience of God who calls us to the future. Jonah holds onto the hatred and sins of the past and misses the power of God's redemptive love.

We are often so cavalier about our sins. We seem to enjoy them and appreciate wallowing in them. The famous British conductor and founder of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Thomas Beecham, once stopped a rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah* in the middle of a chorus. He studied the musicians seated

before him, and then said, “When we sing ‘All we like sheep have gone astray,’ might we please have a little more regret and a little less satisfaction?” Oh, we are so much like Jonah!

Mark’s telling of the good news is indeed a wake-up call for all of us. Jesus issues a call to heartfelt repentance. It was time to share the good news of God’s love with the world. Jesus was looking forward as should we. He called folks like us to follow him. He wanted pupils to listen to his words and act on them. His initial call went to fishermen.

He wanted them to increase their net prophets! He wanted them hooked on a vision of the realm of God breaking into human hearts. He wanted them to recognize that he was giving them a line on something good. He wanted them to tell folks about the patient and loving God who going to change their lives forever.

But, could they respond? What do everyday people know about preaching? Teaching? Healing? Discipleship is about looking ahead. How do you do that when you have responsibilities? Boats, equipment, employees, families, and homes are all part of the baggage they carried with them. Andrew, Peter, James, and John were like you and me. How do we give it up and follow the Lord of life? Mark wants us to ask ourselves a question in chapter one. Could we do what the first disciples did? We are so comfortable with our sins and feeble understandings. Can we be open to a future that is unknown? Can we allow ourselves to let God love and lead us into the vast future God has prepared for us?

On Friday evening at our Congregational Vitality retreat our leader Paul encouraged us to share with another person in the room the things we would like to get rid of in following and serving God faithfully. I shared with a lady from Hershey that I would like to get rid of all the distractions that take me away from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. There are so many little things that get in the way of expressing our love of God with others each day. You know what they look like. Work things (co-workers, meetings, reports, and personnel issues). Family things (health issues, relationships, and appointments). Church things (schedules, conflicts, illnesses, and trust issues). Personal things (fears, inadequacies, failures, and fatigue).

In an age of moral relativism and an “anything goes” sort of belief, it is quite foreign to consider Jesus’ words seriously. Repent? Follow me? The argument goes, “Why should I turn my lie around if I am pleased with the direction it is going?” Yet, look around America this morning. We are dealing with the results of moral bankruptcy—discrimination against minorities (even as we elected an African American to be President), acceptance of dishonesty as long as nobody gets caught (our local Sterling Bank and banks and businesses across the country), a high rate of marital breakdown, flagrant drug and alcohol abuse, violence against the young, weak old, and the innocent, and the evaporation of civil liberties once deemed almost sacred. Personal and corporate repentance is never outmoded and it is need now more than ever.

It is needed. Needed because discipleship (following Jesus Christ) means looking ahead. God’s rule is breaking into human hearts now. Jesus wants us to

join up now in sharing the good news. It is time for us to look to the future and let the past go. We are marching toward eternity.

Come let us follow Jesus. Will you be a Jonah or a fisher of people?

Amen.