

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 24, 2021
“Following Jesus” (Jonah 3:1-5 and Mark 1:14-20)

The story of Jonah is, no doubt, one of our favorite OT stories. Its dramatic and mythical plot captured our attention as children and, as adults, it provides for us a wonderful illustration of God’s mercy and grace.

The story begins with God coming to Jonah with a directive: *Go to Nineveh and proclaim my word. Cry out against the city because of its wickedness.* We don’t know a lot about Jonah, but as a prophet of God, I feel sure he was accustomed to having God send him into different areas to preach the message God had given him. Usually, his message was delivered to the Jews, but now God is asking him to go into Gentile territory – to Nineveh, at that, the capital city of the great and wicked Assyrian Empire.

Assyria was Israel’s most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. They had repeatedly attacked Israel, killing its people and destroying its cities. In 721BC, Assyria carried off the brightest and best of the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity. And Jonah knew it was Nineveh that planned those military campaigns and ordered the killing and enslaving of his kinsmen.

Jonah feels that no one deserves God’s favor less. When he hears of God’s plan for him to go to Nineveh and call the people to repentance, he decides to run from this task. He knows the power of God’s message, a message so great that, even with his weak preaching, the Assyrians will respond and be spared of God’s judgment. He also knows that God will forgive and bless them if they turn from their sin and worship God. But this is now what Jonah wants. He wants vengeance, not mercy. He wants to see this city completely and utterly destroyed by God’s wrath rained down from heaven. Deciding that he will have no part in their salvation, he boards a ship and heads in the opposite direction.

Still, God has a way of getting what he wants. By controlling the stormy seas and a great fish, God displays his absolute, yet loving guidance, putting Jonah back on the path God has chosen for him: to preach to the people of Nineveh.

Eventually, Jonah does preach in the streets of Nineveh, but does only enough to be able to say that he has done what God called him to do and no more. He goes only a third of the way into the great city and speaks just one sentence *In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown.* He doesn’t even tell them that it is God who will overthrow them. And, sure enough, the people respond just as Jonah had feared they would. They believe in God and turn from their evil ways. And God also show the mercy Jonah feared he would. God changes his mind about the destruction he had planned to bring on the city.

Jonah just can’t comprehend God’s love for these evil outsiders. You can almost hear him say, *For the life of me, Lord, I can’t understand. Why would you care about these people?* But God’s message of love and forgiveness was not for the Jonah and the Jewish people alone. God’s love extends to all the people of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. This is the lesson Jonah learns.

This is a message the Assyrians learn, as well. They know they don't deserve that God would spare them. Perhaps they share similar thoughts: *For the life of me, Lord, I don't understand why you would save us. We don't deserve your goodness and mercy.*

Many of us could ask the same question, couldn't we? There are times when we are unlovable, times when we feel no one should care about us – including God. Perhaps we've done something so repulsive that our shame and guilt burden us to the point of feeling that we are worthless in God's sight. Then we hear the good news that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And we, too, ask, *How can this be, Lord? I can't comprehend why I mean so much to you. I can't understand why you would love me, let alone giving your life for me.*

But that is the nature of our God. He exhibits great love, patience and forgiveness. From the story of Jonah, we see how he extended these gifts not only to the people of Nineveh, but to the reluctant prophet, as well. And he has extended these gifts down through history to you and me through his Son.

Mark tells us that Jesus came proclaiming this good news – the good news of God's love, grace, and mercy, saying, *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.* What Jesus was saying is that the Messiah had come. The one who would break the power of sin and death and begin God's personal reign on earth was now among them. The saving power of God was unleashed in the world and Jesus had come to bear witness to that power. He would teach with authority, cure the sick, cast out demons, and perform many other works of power.

But eventually, and ironically, he would surrender that power. Although he held in his hands the power to bring forth all creation, the power that is above the wonders and treasures the world has ever known, he allowed those same hands to be nailed to the cross and his power stripped from him. But after three days behind the stone, the awesome power of God broke through the power of sin and death to restore him to new life. Just as God saved the people of Nineveh 800 years earlier through the message of a prophet who had spent three days in a fish's belly, God saves us through his only Son who spent three days in a dark grave. The power of God's love is matchless. It is greater than any of our sin and deeper than any of our despair. It is above everything else in heaven or on earth. Above all, the power of his love is to save us.

After Jesus comes, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, Mark tells us he immediately begins to build his staff. Walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two sets of brothers. He calls them to follow him and promises to make them fishers of people. These men were not prophets, priests, or kings. There was nothing really special about them, but they saw something special in Jesus, and he saw the potential in them. Immediately, Mark tells us, they dropped their nets and followed him without even a glance back.

Mark makes it sound pretty simple, doesn't he? Without any hesitation or second thought these first disciples drop everything to follow Jesus. But I don't think it was as simple as that. In reading those few verses, we can easily discount the sacrifice they made. They were just fishermen, we might think. They probably had little education and were not very involved in their community. But fishing was their life. They had, no doubt, turned it into a lucrative

business. And they, too, had homes and families who depended on them. They were being asked to leave all this behind. It truly was a sacrifice, but when Jesus called them, they dropped everything to follow him. It was no little thing.

How many of us would have been willing to drop everything and sign on to follow this rabbi? Just think of the excuses we could make. *But Lord, my nets are too full to drop and leave behind. They are filled with jobs, family responsibilities, community involvement, retirement plans, and a little bit of leisure. Perhaps you can return when they're not so full. For now, I'll have to pass.* But clinging to our nets robs us of the joy and blessings that come from following Jesus. We miss the great adventures of walking with Jesus into areas of ministry and service that draw us into a closer relationship with him and others.

The disciples didn't know – and couldn't have known – at that point who Jesus really was or where their choice to follow him would lead, but they dropped their nets. In a way they could not understand that day, God was being made known to them, and would continue to be made known to them in the person of Jesus Christ. It was an epiphany! And that's the season we're celebrating in the church – how God is made known through Christ.

Over the course of the next three years, as Jesus wrote his message on the hearts of these men and they saw the power of God's love at work in him, they were transformed into witnesses Jesus would send into the world to tell others of God's redemptive love. What joy they must have known in following Jesus. It's a joy we can share, as well. It isn't just Simon and Andrew and James and John to whom God is made known in Jesus. And it isn't just Simon and Andrew and James and John who are called to follow Jesus and bear witness to his love and grace. He needs us, as well, to be his hands and feet in the world. He needs us to serve others as he did. He needs our mouths to tell of the wonderfully powerful ways he is at work in our lives.

Jesus calls each of us to drop our nets and follow him. He calls us every single day, wherever we are and whatever we are doing. We don't have to be rich; we don't have to have a lot to offer. We just have to be willing to let go of our nets and follow. We have to be willing to make ourselves available so that God may use us to share that powerful and eternal message – the same message Jonah shared in Nineveh and the same message illustrated by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. If we haven't dropped our nets, may we do so today and enter into a blessed and joy-filled life of following Jesus.