

3 Epiphany B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:5-12

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

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Grace to you from Jesus who loves us.

The book of Jonah is a really neat book in the Bible, because it is so relatable to our own lives. You remember Jonah right? The guy who was swallowed by a fish? (Perhaps this is the source of all those fishing tales - "it was this big!") Ok, you may call me out on that because while we know how to tell a fish story, few of us would go so far as to say that we have been swallowed by a fish, but the story still relates to us, because lots of us have debated with God about what we're supposed to do or not do. And lots of us have been disappointed when God didn't do what we thought God should!

So yes, to fill out the picture a bit, Jonah was asked by God to go to Nineveh and let the people know that God really wasn't very pleased with their lifestyle. The first time God asked him to do this (we didn't read this part this morning) Jonah headed off in the opposite direction! I guess he thought if he just ran away that God wouldn't be able or interested to find him or bother with him. He was wrong.

That's the point of Jonah's story when he gets on the ship and a storm comes up tossing everyone about, everyone is afraid they are going to sink - and Jonah is afraid because he knows he was trying to run away. So he equates the turbulent sea with his attempted escape from his duties. Rather than put everyone in peril he himself goes overboard and that's when he ends up on the belly of the fish or sometimes we say it was a whale. Like the tomb of Christ, Jonah is there for 3 days - lots of time to think things through - before he is spit up on the land for a second try.

God does address him a second time, as we heard, "Jonah I want you to go to Nineveh." This time Jonah does what he is asked, probably looking over his shoulder for the next beast who is lingering near in case he gets cold feet again!

We ought to sympathize with him, because his task in Nineveh wasn't a pleasant one. I mean I don't even ask for volunteers to go about the streets of Edmonton shouting "Forty days more and Edmonton shall be overthrown!" But that's what God wanted Jonah to do.

The people there were "living in sin," ignoring the commandments of God. They didn't care about each other, strangers or even themselves too much. Last

week we heard in the Gospel of John, "Can anything good come from Nineveh?" So you see, it had a reputation.

Who wants to be the bearer of bad news? Jonah didn't want to tell them that things needed to change and I can't blame him. Who wants to tell anyone about the mistakes they are making, how they are messing up, about their imperfection, or that God is displeased with their behavior? But Jonah knew he was called to do just that. And miraculously, the people had a change of heart, repented and changed their ways.

I've said before that the word "sin" has nearly lost its meaning. We don't like to talk about it. Historically, the church talked about it A LOT. Sin was a central theme in the Reformation, and at times a manipulative tool to re-align wayward church members like a harmful ax wielded in the direction of people down on their luck, suffering from any number of health concerns or who simply didn't fit in. I remember one woman years ago for whom some "helpful" church ladies came and cleaned out her house, but they weren't looking for cobwebs and dirt, they were looking for "sinful" things that imprisoned her with borderline personality disorder. Taking her to a doctor would have been more appropriate. The church talked about sin so much that people became really scared, wondering how or if God could EVER love them. I might even say that the topic of uncertainty about God's love is probably the number one concern people admit to me. So, of late, we steer around it. Maybe we're more like Jonah than we thought.

Sin, can me anything that keeps us distanced from God, that puts a wall between God and us. It's not necessarily any specific thing we do or don't do, but it could also be many of the things we do or don't do. Sin is not equated with mental health or even our uncertainties, it's not sinful to be rich, not to live on the streets. IT's actually quite difficult to pin it down and that's why repentance – or a conversation with God is so important. Sin is between you and God.

Mark's Gospel reminds us that repentance and believing in God go hand in hand. Repentance, admitting where we've gone wrong, isn't intended to keep us *from* God, but to keep us from ourselves and turn us to God. When we get caught up ruminating on the things we've done wrong or the people we've hurt, we can get stuck there. Maybe we begin to think we're the only ones who have doubted or done such a terrible thing, so we stay away.

When we do come here on Sunday morning we're tempted to push all those doubts and fears under the surface so no one will know. Some of us are so practiced at it we can leave our problems in the car or home and pick up right where we left off when we go back. We smile, say good morning and warm our hands with a cup of coffee. It's really difficult to expose our uncertainties and

imperfections. Jesus already know though, and encourages us to come to him despite anything that might be going on in our lives.

Shortly we will have the Rite of Healing. This can be a beautiful way (as the scriptures say where 2 or 3 are together God is there) to enter a holy space. Certainly God invites us to conversation any time, but today you are welcome to come for the Rite of Healing and let God hear what's going on in your life, in your heart. I pray that any of us would find this place to be a safe place to let go a little bit.

And for all of us - in our confidence or indecision, in our joy or anger, health or sickness, love or shame - God's promise of love is a sure thing. In all of our worries and doubts, it is the one thing that will not fail. God is our rock and salvation.

Amen.