

January 25, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Epiphany 3, Year B
Jonah 3:1-10
Mark 1:14-20

FISH STORIES OF INVITATION

This Jonah text from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, and the Mark text from the New Testament are both “fish stories,” in that exaggerated manner we talk about “the big fish that got away.” Both are over-the-top “tall tales,” in my view. One story is about a huge fish that swallows and spits out a reluctant prophet. The other about people becoming fishers of men as Jesus’ disciples, or as we would say more inclusively, becoming “fishers of people,” bringing people into the experience of God’s realm here on earth. Frankly, I find the idea that Simon, Andrew, James and John immediately dropped their fishing nets, abandoning their boats, livelihoods and families to follow Jesus, hard to imagine. Just as hard to believe as this bizarre sounding tall tale of a man entering, exiting and surviving the belly of a fish! The New Testament fishermen’s behavior sounds rash and a tad irresponsible (what did their wives and children have to say about this?) and Jonah’s experience sounds like a fairy tale, whimsical and far-fetched at best.

But these stories are preserved in sacred Jewish and Christian scriptures as narratives, which reveal God’s nature and workings with us. As we delve deeper into these two scriptures this morning, I suggest we keep asking ourselves: What are we learning about God here? God’s character, God’s priorities, God’s vision for the future among us? Certainly, good questions for anyone seeking to connect more deeply with God. Relevant ponderings for Falcon Heights Church United Church of Christ on the day of our Annual Meeting as a congregation.

Turning first to the Jonah story, this is a satirical tale probably written during the 5th-4th century BCE, a time of post-exilic return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. This was a period of growing prosperity, self-focus and even smugness among Israel’s rulers, the socially elite and the religious leaders. The anonymous author appears intent on challenging Israel’s increasing exclusivism and narrow religious views. Don’t think for a minute that his or her listeners took this as a literal description of being swallowed by a whale. To them, this was a challenging pronouncement about the truth of God’s intentions, woven through the symbolism of a wild story. What might it mean for them to remember the wider call to show God’s loving mercy to all the nations, and not just their own people?

One Lutheran colleague blogs about the Jonah story by noting: “Jonah is a book of prophecy in the way ‘The Daily Show’ is news. When it comes to news,

we often learn as much, or more, from the farce than you do from the serious version,” she writes. (The Rev. Pam Fickenscher, http://pastorpam.typepad.com/living_word_by_word/). Think of Saturday Night Live parodies of our current political issues, and before that the controversial offerings of the Smothers Brothers during the Vietnam War.

Let’s revisit the story and see if we can hear God’s truth: The author sets the story’s scene at probably 9th-8th century BCE, when Assyria was a powerful foe to the Israelites. Jonah, a minor Jewish prophet, is called by God to “cry out against” a large non-Jewish city called Nineveh, a huge, prosperous, militarily strong metropolis in the Assyrian empire, somewhere near modern day Mosul in Iraq. “Their wickedness has come up before me,” says God to Jonah. “You need to go warn them I am angry.” “Uh....no can do,” thinks Jonah, turning not east toward Nineveh, but jumping on a ship with a crew of non-Jews that is headed west to Tarshish.

Jonah, notes the text, was seeking to “get away from the presence of the Lord.” What an interesting notion! This story existed for years in oral tradition, as did much of the Bible, and already the listening audience is chuckling. “Get away from the presence of the Lord?” Ha! Fat chance! As in any clever story, we are given a chance to ponder our own situation. “Hmmm,” we might wonder. “In what ways do I attempt to flee God’s presence?” But God is getting impatient; the salvation of Nineveh, a pagan city, is at stake and Jonah is ignoring God’s call. God whips up a huge storm, the sailors start frantically praying to their own gods for safety, but Jonah is down in the hold taking a nap. Again, we might reflect for a moment on just *what* life storm we, or even our congregation, might be “sleeping through” at this time. The captain appeals to Jonah to also pray, just as his crew is throwing lots trying to figure out who among them has brought this bad fortune. Have to blame somebody! Jonah is revealed to be the problem, and as the crew frantically quizzes him about his origins and his mission, they learn he is *fleeing the presence his own Lord*. What?! Even though the crewmembers don’t believe in the Jewish God, they know this is bad news. But before the crew can set upon him, Jonah hastily suggests they pitch him overboard. The men resist, fearing being “guilty of innocent blood” (interestingly righteous pagans, these men), but as the storm worsens they toss him into the raging sea. The sea and its mysterious waters: always an ancient symbol of chaos and evil water demons. But as Jonah hits the water, the wind and waves miraculously quiet. The crew falls on their collective knees and is converted to the powerful God of the Israelites, and offer a “sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” Jonah, the supposedly righteous Israelite, is another story.

Here is our hint of the narrator’s intent: Those outside the fold, the non-believers, are often quicker to hear God’s invitation, recognize their sins, repent and turn to God. Thrashing in the water, Jonah is immediately swallowed by a large fish and remains there for three days. Plunged into a sloshing, stinking void that we can hardly imagine, Jonah starts to pray. There in chapter two we hear

his rather obsequious fawning, “I am driven away from your sight: how shall I look again upon your holy temple?” Jonah, remember, has tried to flee from God. “As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you.” No, Jonah remembered his own *hide*. “O God,” drones Jonah, “those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.” *What?* The guys on the boat who worshiped idols ended up converting to belief in God Almighty! The ancient audience would now be shaking their collective heads in bemused disbelief. “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” Jonah piously intones. The large fish, probably nauseated by these prayers, spits Jonah out on dry land.

God says a second time with increased urgency: “Get up, go to Nineveh and proclaim the message I tell you.” What’s coming is the irony of a whole pagan city repenting after they hear Jonah’s seven-word sermon: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” It isn’t Jonah’s words they respond to, but the grace of the God who is behind the message. From the king, to the commoners to the animals. Even donkeys and oxen repenting, in ashes and sackcloth. Sounds like an SNL skit to me. But in the hilarity there is a message: A whole city hears the invitation, changes its mind, and lo and behold, God quickly changes God’s mind! God had planned a retributive calamity to befall Nineveh, and now God does not do it.

But Jonah’s response to the outsiders’ immediate repentance and God’s change of heart? Jonah is furious! Feeling ripped off because God did not smite the city, he sulks: “What’s the point of me going all the way to Nineveh if there isn’t some huge showdown between good and evil?” A showdown between right and wrong. Don’t we ache for this sometimes, in families, at work, in our church? Jonah seems indignant that God shows mercy on these people, these foreigners, these idol-worshippers. The narrator wants *Israel* to consider Jonah’s narrow exclusivism and to be challenged themselves to repentance. The narrator hopes to remind them of their call to preach to all the nations about God’s extraordinary mercy and forgiveness. As part of the audience, I am reminded of how I, on occasion, have sat in bitterness and sulked, rather than embracing the fact that certain people in my life are now forgiven and enfolded in God’s loving mercy.

Turning briefly to our other “fish story,” we see Jesus bursting on the scene as an adult, baptized by John and blessed by an otherworldly voice calling him Son, the Beloved. Mark doesn’t mince words; his gospel book is spare and filled with urgency. Immediately, Jesus is in Galilee, preaching that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

He speaks of the time of God’s just rule, where all are to be included – those who live in poverty and prison, those who are marginalized and those without hope. “Come, come, be part of this,” Jesus says to some men casting their nets by the Sea of Galilee, “I’ll make you fish for people.” And immediately the men respond. Not unlike the pagan city of Nineveh. They are invited not to be

passive recipients of something, as in “come to Jesus and everything will be all right!” They are to help lead others in experiencing the presence of the Kingdom of God, to know God who is urgent with aching care for Creation. “Come, won’t you join with me?” God asks through Jesus.

There is a part of me that wants to dismiss the exaggerated hyperbole of these passages: God speaking to people directly? Whoa, isn’t our news full of people doing awful things because they heard God tell them to? And what about these fishermen: they leave co-workers to pick up the pieces, family members to fend for themselves! So irresponsible, I can’t imagine any of this applying to my life today. But Jesus’ eagerness, his insistence, is palpable, revealing God’s urgency in a new way. “You are going to have to drop something, to let go of – what? – self-interest, certain limiting perspectives, destructive habits, incessant worry.” This gives me pause: what are the nets I need to drop today to follow Jesus? What nets does this congregation need to drop? “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” says Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.