

Epiphany 3B
January 24, 2021
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:5-12
I Cor 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

[Note: several days ago as I began reading the Scriptures appointed for today and planning a sermon, I looked forward to preaching on Jonah. Thoughts began to come together, though my fingers had not yet gone to the keyboard to write. Then I saw a post by my friend and colleague, Rev. Thom M. Shuman that well-captured what I was preparing to write. With his kind and generous permission, I offer that post for your meditation today. I have made some additions and modified some phrasing, but the majority of what follows is Rev. Shuman's. I thank him for his words and graciousness in permitting me to share them with you.]

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I always love it when Jonah shows up in the lectionary cycle. It gives the preacher a chance to move past the “a whale of a tale” focus and perhaps see what the book is actually pointing us towards, why it is in the canon of Scripture, what it says to us today. Some folks view it as satire, a parody of the whole prophetic thing. Others see it as parable. Whatever its genre, it is really about the scandal of God's mercy. Of a God who is far more generous with grace than we ever are (despite the way we litter it in our sermons, prayers, and songs). Of a God who is willing to show mercy to those we are pretty convinced need a good old-fashioned whupping.

You know the story, about the prophet called to go to one place – Nineveh – and instead heads off in the other direction to go to Tarshish, hundreds of miles from Nineveh. About his working on the fishing boat until a big storm comes up and the crew tosses the scapegoat overboard, who lands in the belly of the biggest fish you ever saw and then after three days is rather unceremoniously vomited on to the beach.

About his cranky ministry to that great city, Nineveh, where Jonah wanders the streets muttering under his breath (so only the ants can hear him) about the people needing to repent – “Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed.” About the people of Nineveh who believed him and repented – every single one of them from the youngest to the oldest even to the king sitting on his throne. About the cranky prophet getting all bent out of shape when they do repent and God saves them all. About the cranky prophet pouting in the heat of the day.

No wonder we want to talk only about the whale . . . this story hits uncomfortably close to home, especially in these days in which we live, doesn't it?

I mean, which preacher would want to leave that parish which is always eager to hear sermons about social justice, to go to some little country church to preach to folks who have Confederate flags in their yards and attached to their pickups. Which minister would want to leave the safety of folks who are happy when Jesus convinces the politicians to pass their political agenda in return for a solid political bloc, to go preach in Portland or Seattle?

You see, that is what this book is all about - about us seeing how important, how precious, how loved those we look down our noses at, are to our God - our God! To recognize, to admit to ourselves, to take the daring risk, no matter how cranky it makes us, to share the gospel of grace,

love, justice, inclusion with everyone. Even “them,” the ones who are so diametrically opposite to us.

Years ago, and I mean years ago, I came across the writings of a Baptist minister in the South named Will Campbell who was active in the civil rights movement. He was present when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was organized under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., He escorted black students during the integration of the public schools. He worked for reconciliation among people who were separated by politics, religion, race, class. He dedicated his life to ministering to those who were considered to be the dispossessed.

I remember the story of him being asked why, when he was so involved in the civil rights movement, he would continue to go and preach in little country churches filled with members of the KKK (he had grown up in a church with Bibles emblazoned with the KKK emblem). His response was that the only message folks in those churches heard was about hate. And he went into their midst to preach about love, about God's scandalous mercy.

I wonder if God is looking for a few Will Campbells, a few Jonahs, a few folks who, grudgingly and crankily and muttering under their breath perhaps, will go and preach about change, about love, about caring for those we cannot abide, so that God's scandalous mercy might touch them, just as it touches us.

Though, come to think of it, God's scandalous mercy is a whale of a tale to most of us these days, isn't it?

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