

The Eleventh Annual Address of the Rector to St. Francis Church
January 24, 2009

Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah, a prophet who never really got it. (Sad but true!) The Word of the Lord came to Jonah as it has come to God's people throughout the Bible and down through the ages: to Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Joshua the son of Nun and Rahab the prostitute, Samuel and Jeremiah and Deborah and Esther and Peter and Andrew and the Zebedee boys and Mary Magdalene and Dorothy Day. The Bible doesn't give us a lot of specifics about how that call became clear to any of them or how you hear "the Word of the Lord." But I've noticed two things that seem to be consistent throughout the Biblical narrative and down to present day.

- (1) It is impossible to hear God if you are doing all of the talking.*
- (2) God is very likely to push you out of your comfort zone and ask you to take a risk you may well feel ill-prepared for.*

God has this knack of using inadequate people to do impossible work—and yet again and again the history of the Church is the still unfolding story of God working in and through ordinary people to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Anyway, the Word of the Lord came to Jonah: go at once to Nineveh, that great city, to proclaim God's judgment there. But Jonah didn't want to go. In fact he got on a boat headed exactly in the opposite direction. But the Lord doesn't give up that easily. And one of the points of the story, I think, is that if God calls us to a task, it's easier to face up to it sooner rather than later because you can't outrun God. You may recall what comes next: a storm at sea. Jonah is thrown overboard because it becomes clear that he is the cause of the storm and he is promptly swallowed by a great fish. And then the text says, literally, that the fish couldn't stomach Jonah; so after three days of belly ache the great fish vomited Jonah back up on the shore right where he began. That's where we picked up the story today: the Word of the Lord comes to this reluctant prophet a second time. And the Lord says, "Jonah, go to Nineveh, that great city! (I'm really not kidding around!)"

So this time Jonah goes. His heart isn't in it but he does what he is told, since living in the belly of a great fish is way not cool. And amazingly the king and the people (and apparently even the cattle) of Nineveh all repent. This is pretty hilarious because usually the words of the prophets of Israel fall on deaf ears. Usually Israel tries to kill the prophets or ignore them or lock them up in an insane asylum. But here these foreigners—these goyim—repent and change their ways. God changes God's mind about doing them harm and forgives them.

This confuses and even frustrates those of us who may be more familiar with the Unmoved Mover of the philosophers than with "I AM" of the Bible. We don't like to hear about God changing God's mind. It infuriates Jonah, but not for the same reasons it may trouble the defenders of Platonic idealism. It infuriates Jonah because he had assumed that his enemies and God's enemies were one and the same. And so Jonah attempts a sort of jujitsu move against God; he tries to disarm God by turning God's own nature against God:

I knew you were compassionate and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in kindness and renouncing punishment. And that's exactly why I fled to Tarshish in the first place! I'd rather die than have you extend that kind of love and forgiveness to Ninevites!

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The most real thing about the God of the Bible is not changelessness; the most real thing about God is that God is abounding in steadfast love and mercy. As the Prayerbook says, “God desires not the death of sinners but that they may turn...and live.” (BCP 269) God’s change of mind is not out of fickleness; in fact it is completely in keeping with God’s character to show mercy to all who repent, even if they are Ninevites.

Some scholars believe that Jonah is a post-exilic book; if it is then it takes on an even more profound meaning because it’s about asking Jonah to forgive the very same people who caused the exile. (Nineveh is in Assyria, by the waters of Babylon.) Regardless of its original context, though, it’s a story for all times. If you imagine Jonah being asked to go to Bagdad or Tehran or Gaza then you begin to see the larger point. It is a tough parable that challenges Jonah’s world-view and ours. Can God’s love and mercy and forgiveness and healing extend even to those from whom we are tempted to withhold grace? Or would you rather die with Jonah than believe that God can forgive people that you find undeserving of mercy and forgiveness?

I want to say a few words about each of the three main characters in this story. First, we should notice that Jonah is a funny character, but that he is not unique in the Bible. He is what you might call the *unfaithful insider*. Israel, as it turns out, has a lot of experience with this. It’s about being God’s chosen people and yet behaving like everyone else. God says to Israel on a fairly regular basis something parents have been heard to say to their children over many centuries: *you ought to know better!* If you can recite the psalms and quote from Scripture, but are not a *doer* of the Word (as the epistle of James puts it) then what on earth is the point?

Henri Nouwen is absolutely right: *we are God’s beloved*. We live in a world that would deny that: a world that tends to define us based on our class or race or gender or sexual orientation. The world would make us consumers and judge us based on our purchasing power. But the good news we proclaim here week in and week out is that we belong to God: by the waters of Baptism we have been claimed and marked and sealed as Christ’s own forever. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, not even death!

But if we aren’t careful that noble calling can make us complacent and even arrogant. We can start to talk like being an “insider” is the be-all-and-end-all of faith. We can start to act like this is all about privilege and forget that it is about responding in faith, that we are called by name to take up our cross to follow Jesus. There is always some danger that we will become like Jonah: *unfaithful insiders*—prophets who “never really get it.” (Sad but true!)

Now the foil to Jonah in this story are the *faithful outsiders*—the Ninevites. This, too, is not an isolated Biblical claim. Ruth, you will remember, was a Moabite woman who understood covenantal love and responsibility better than the Jews of her day. “Wherever you go,” she told her Jewish mother-in-law, “I will go. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.” In the New Testament there is of course that “good” Samaritan. I always think it helps if you are of a generation that can hear George Carlin offering a litany of oxymorons like “jumbo shrimp” or “military intelligence” that we should hear him saying “good Samaritan” in the same tone of voice. Because no self-respecting hearer of Jesus’ could have ever imagined a *good* Samaritan. Yet it is that faithful outsider who shows mercy. In doing so he reveals the will and even the face of God.

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The sad but true irony down to our own day is that sometimes people who claim to be atheists are a lot kinder and more merciful and loving than we Christians are.

The goal of this story is therefore a double whammy that is meant to convert faithful insiders. That may sound odd to our ears: we are tempted to think that we are already “converted” and our sole purpose is to make sure others know what we know. But this story pushes that presupposition. I think the right response to this fishing story is not resentment or denial, but laughter. This is pretty funny stuff because it hits so close to home and also, I think, because if we can laugh at ourselves, then we have a shot at redemption. The problem is that too often religious people are way too serious.

This leads me to the third character in the story: God. Most of us find it pretty comforting to be told that God is a God of steadfast love and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. At least when it comes to how we hope God will treat *us*! But when that same love and mercy extend to people we don’t like very much, then we may begin to wonder if God isn’t getting a little soft on sin. With our enemies we sometimes wish God’s *judgment* would kick in. It turns out, though, that God’s grace is so amazing that it can save not just wretches like us but even wretches we don’t like very much or don’t find worthy of forgiveness.

Our Jewish friends read the Book of Jonah at the afternoon service on the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In that liturgical context it serves for them primarily as an invitation to repentance—an invitation to return to God and entrust themselves to God’s steadfast love and mercy. They are reading the story in a way that calls upon them to do what the Ninevites did: to repent and return to the Lord. If we were to read this story on Ash Wednesday we’d probably hear it in a similar way.

But our liturgical context on this weekend is in the midst of our Annual Meeting, just a month after Christmas. Jill’s sermon last weekend, and in fact virtually all of the readings appointed for the entire Epiphany season, invite us to reflect on our theology of vocation or calling. That calling is not just about each of us as individuals, but also about what it means to be part of a community—to be a pilgrim people on a journey together to seek and serve Christ in this time and place. It’s about our shared call to be light to the world and salt of the earth. Tonight’s gospel reading about the call of those two sets of brothers as well as the collect for the day sums up this theme nicely: *Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ...*

“What kind of community is God calling us to become?” We worship a God in Jesus Christ who, as it turns out, is not always discriminating about the company He keeps. After all, more than anything else that is what troubled the unfaithful insiders of Jesus’ day: his indiscriminate social choices. He was happy to accept an invitation to dine with the socially respectable Scribes and the Pharisees but he was just as happy, it seemed, to sit down with the despised or rejected: with Samaritans or tax collectors or prostitutes. Jesus made room at the Table for everyone; there was always room for one more. This scandalized the respected establishment in his day.

Earlier this month I shared a line that I read in a remarkable spiritual autobiography by Sara Miles called *Take this Bread*. In that book she shares the story of her journey from being a committed atheist to a practicing Christian, a conversion that began when she wandered into St. Gregory of

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Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco and was welcomed to the Table to receive the Sacrament. Miles writes:

I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where even the despised and the outcasts are honored.

How do we more faithfully live out of (and into) that reality as a congregation? Meister Eckhardt once said, “You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion.” I believe that we are called to practice radical hospitality—a ministry of welcome to all who come here seeking the living Christ. Indeed to go further—for us to seek Christ in them, and to know that while they come to us as strangers, God’s invitation and promise to us is that they can become our friends—and even family.

There is no doubt that we are living in dangerous times and we should not be in denial about that. Politically, economically, globally we are facing huge challenges and the Church is not an escape from all of that but an invitation to enter into it all the more deeply. Like Jonah, we are called to share the message of God’s grace and mercy with a broken world. We do well to remember that we’ve been here before:

- in the early years when the first disciples overcame their fears and unlocked the doors where they were hiding to go out into the world and proclaim good news for the poor and release to the captives;
- in those first centuries of the Church’s life when it took a radically counter-cultural stand against the powerful Roman domination system and insisted that Jesus (and not Caesar!) was Lord;
- in the time of Francis of Assisi, when the Church had become powerful and corrupt and a simple monk prayed that he might be an instrument of God’s peace.;
- in the time of the Reformation when Protestants and Catholics were literally killing each other and Anglican Christians found a “middle way” that would allow freedom of thought and respect for one another and insisted upon a Table where all would be welcome.

As we meet this weekend to hear reports from the past year and to envision God’s preferred future for us and to elect lay leaders to help guide us toward that future, it is easy to lose the forest from the trees. It is easy to forget why we do these things. We do them because we are called to be the Church in this time and place, because we are called to be instruments of God’s peace and ambassadors of reconciliation; because we are called to bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people.

Even Ninevites.