

A Place For Jonah

Epiphany 3, Cycle B: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

One of the techniques music teachers use to help their students learn the way of playing or singing something correctly – a difficult rhythm, for example – is to have them intentionally do it the wrong way. Among other things, it improves the student's listening: when you explore all the different ways of doing something the wrong way, the correct way stands apart from the others. And when you can hear the difference between the correct way and all of the other ways you have tried that are wrong, your improved listening determines your performance. For musicians, it's all about listening; and one of a music teacher's greatest accomplishments will be to develop in his or her students the ability to listen critically to their own playing or singing.

This may be precisely the value of the story of Jonah. We have seen reluctant prophets before in the Hebrew Bible, but Jonah stands apart from the others, first by running away when God calls him to prophesy to the Ninevites, and then by becoming angry when his prophesying actually accomplishes its intended results. The story of Jonah shows all the wrong ways to respond when God calls a person into ministry and discipleship.

Of course, it's a funny story, too; and its humour and fantasy disarm readers in such a way that we're inclined to remember Jonah's bad example and make a mental note to ourselves not to be like him.

But there is also a wisdom component in this story that is quite inspiring. One thing we notice is that Jonah, for all of his deficits, is amazingly effective. God's power works in him. Not only do the Ninevites come to faith as a result of Jonah's minimalist message – one sentence: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (or perhaps "have a change of heart," another reading of the Hebrew) – but even the crew on the ship he leaves on from Joppa forsake their own gods and pray to the God of Israel.

Something else we learn from the story is how merciful God is. The Ninevites were a bad lot. In the skit our youth just performed, we learned that the Assyrians were merciless to their enemies in war, but Nineveh was also considered to be another Sodom and Gemorrah. The people were worldly and self-absorbed; nationalism came easily; their lifestyle was the very opposite of the righteousness defined by the law of Moses. But when they repent; when they "turn over" as the Hebrew says, God forgives them! God's mercy is available – even to the Ninevites! And then, as we read through the story and reflect on it, we see what Jonah cannot see, i.e. that God's mercy is available – even to Jonah!

Today's Gospel shows us quite the opposite of the Jonah story. When Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John, there is no hesitation, no resistance. They leave everything and follow. We understand the lesson the designers of our lectionary have in mind: there is the wrong kind of response – the response Jonah gave God; and there is the correct response, the drop-what-you're-doing and follow Jesus response of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. The wrong way, and the right way!

But which is the more realistic? Doesn't human nature have a call, as well which leaves us more in the sandals of Jonah than among those first disciples of Jesus?

One of the things I love about the Jonah story is that he has a time-out. In the belly of the great fish, he has the opportunity to reconsider his call. And he prays; in fact, he prays a most eloquent prayer that has worked its way into the liturgy of both church and synagogue.

I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows passed over me.
Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?"
The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;

and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord.

The prayer speaks of transformation and how God's power working within us calls us not only into discipleship, but also to be more like God. By the end of the Jonah story, we still see Jonah as a work-in-progress. But the message to the reader is clear: mercy is the benchmark of life in the Spirit. Our call in God is a call to be merciful, to forgive, to restore, to be part of the transformation for which our world hungers. And the story shows us that it doesn't matter on what scale we exercise our mercy: it can be to a whole nation of enemies or it can be with someone as stubborn and benighted as Jonah. It doesn't matter – only that we become God's mercy in the world; that we forgive and unbind and coach and perhaps even inspire a new way of living. That we engage in acts of mercy, recognizing that in and through mercy, God's will is accomplished.