

Epiphany 3, Yr. B

January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Mark 1:14-20

In this morning's collect, we prayed for the grace to answer God's call to be Epiphany people, to be the people who bring the light of Christ into the world. That would make a great mission statement, wouldn't it? That we are to be epiphany people. But, as always, the question is – how are we supposed to do that, exactly? I don't think we wake up one morning and VIOLA! - I'm an epiphany person. Becoming that kind of person is about change and transformation. It's about saying "yes" to God's vision of the world and to our part in that transformation – it's about growing into the kingdom of God. The first reading and the Gospel are about hearing God's call and then answering it, or not. They're about hearing God's call and either accepting or rejecting the change that that call will require.

Let's start with Jonah. It's a great story. Unfortunately, we only hear part of it. Perhaps you'll remember the rest – how God calls Jonah and asks him to go to Nineveh, a great Assyrian city and call upon them to repent. Jonah didn't want to go. The Assyrians were cruel conquerors and Jonah, standing in for Israel here, had a narrow, bitter attitude toward them. Destruction of the Ninevites sounded good to him. So Jonah decided to reject God's call and head off in the opposite direction. He got on a ship headed for Tarshish, but while they were at sea, there was a great storm and, to save them all from certain death, Jonah tells the sailors what's going on and that to save themselves, they should throw him overboard. They weren't very happy about that, but they finally do so. That calms the storm, which is great for the sailors, but Jonah himself is swallowed by a whale, spends three days in its belly, finally sees the light and prays for deliverance. The text says that Yahweh speaks to the whale and the whale spits Jonah out on the shore. God then speaks to Jonah a second time, with the same message and this time Jonah acquiesces and goes through the great city with about the shortest sermon ever preached: 40 DAYS MORE AND NINEVAH WILL BE OVERTHOWN! Much to his chagrin, the whole city, including the king and the animals, repents and God spares them. But this irks Jonah all the more and he goes out into the desert and sits there in a royal pout – a rage according to the text. "I knew you'd do that," he tells God. "That's just your style; I knew you're tender and compassionate and that you'd relent." He's so upset that he says he wants to die. A note here about this book. Most scholars see it as a kind of folk tale, or perhaps a caricature. The early church fathers weren't quite sure what to do with it, but in our own day the attempts at interpretation got a bit far-fetched. One man came to the conclusion that the fleeing Jonah went to ground for three days in some sort of private retreat of his, a small café known as "The Whale." But folk tale or not, there are a couple of powerful messages here. One is that, like the Israelites for whom the story was originally told, who thought of themselves as the people of God and were quite prepared to exclude everyone else, that's not how God operates – this God who created all and loves all. Another is that when it's about US standing before God, we're all in favor of God's mercy; when it's an enemy standing before God, we'd much prefer God's justice.

The story of Jonah is about God's call and how we respond. Jonah was forced into changing direction. I don't know if you could even say that he said "yes" to God. But there were other

calls and responses and changes made in the story. The Ninevites heard the call to repent and changed. God saw their repentance and changed his mind about them.

Call, response and change are the subjects of the Gospel as well. In John, we heard that when Jesus called his disciples, he invited them to “come and see.” Mark tells the story differently, in accord with his theology of urgency. In that part of the Gospel we just heard, Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, sees Simon and Andrew and then James and John, says “follow me,” and they simply leave everything behind and do so. They come IMMEDIATELY in Mark’s language; I think most of us get a bit stuck on the “immediately” part of this story. Many of you have taken Roger’s class on thinking rationally. A surface reading of this text seems like the disciples weren’t thinking rationally at all – no time to weigh the options, no cost/benefit analysis, no consultation with family members who would be affected. They just get up and go. One could argue that this is a rather truncated version of what happened; maybe they had at least heard of Jesus before. Or one could think that Jesus must have been a very powerful and charismatic person. It’s been said that to look at Jesus was to see God – nothing got in the way. You’ll remember that it was said of him that “he spoke with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees.” Much closer to our own time, I’ve read that when new British soldiers came to India, the older officers warned them to “stay away from Gandhi, he’ll get you.” And it apparently was true that many people who went to observe and listen to him, often stayed to serve and work with him because his vision and his person were so compelling. Was it like that with Jesus, only more so?

These past few weeks, the scriptures have been about call and response and the change that follows. Think of Mary who said “yes” and whose entire life was changed as a result. Or Joseph. Or the wise men who left home and were undoubtedly irrevocably changed as a result. And what about us? Are we, too, invited, called to follow Jesus more closely and, therefore, to change? I think the answer to that is surely yes.

But change is hard, and more so as we get older, I think. In that regard, here are a couple of stories that I, at least, could relate to. One was of a fellow going back for a 30-year class reunion and complaining to a friend, “See that fellow over there? Well – he’s gotten so bald and so fat, he didn’t even recognize me!” Hmmm. That one I’m sure is apocryphal, but this next one is true. It’s about a man named Harry Lipzig. He’s a lawyer and for 50 years, he didn’t actually practice law, he ran the business end of the firm. But at 88, he read about a woman who was suing New York City because her 71 year old husband had been killed by a police officer who was driving drunk. Her argument was that that death had deprived her of her husband’s future earnings. The city thought it had a good defense – after all the guy was 71 – how much could his future earnings amount to? And then they realized that the lawyer on the other side was 88 – they settled the case for \$1.25 million.

It’s never too late. At every stage of our lives and at every age, we’re always being challenged to keep growing, to reach for new insights, new ideas, new ways to serve, new ways in which we can be epiphany people. Psychologists talk about the evolving self, the self that moves from thinking it’s ALL ABOUT ME to that self that has the broadest possible vision of God, or the

world, of life. I remember one of my seminary professors putting it this way: the whole thing is about the movement from EGO to WE-GO.

Last week I had a telephone call from a fellow at the local radio stations' office in Sturgeon Bay. He was thinking he'd like to do one or maybe a series of conversations about spiritual growth. I went, thinking we'd have a preliminary conversation and then do a broadcast later. Well, we did both, so listen for it! But what was most interesting was the conversation about spiritual hunger in this country. People, especially young people, may not use the word God or even the word spirituality, but are more apt to talk about finding meaning or things that are of ultimate value. And that, I think, is God's call – because it means that there's reflection on what's missing in a life, reflection on what the world could be, reflection on what we owe to one another – all of that is preparatory to the kind of change of ideas and change of hearts that makes for Epiphany people.

A final thought. Psychologists tell us that often change results from a crisis – when things fall apart in our lives. There are spiritual writers today who look at the current state of the world and make a comparison with our personal lives. That in the crises that we face in our modern world, we have the opportunity for what's called A Great Turning – that perhaps in our day we can make decisions that move us toward a global community based on our recognition that EVERY person is beloved of God, maybe we're at a time when we'll be dedicated to the care of the planet, committed to justice and equality, willing to work to raise our brothers and sisters from poverty, violence and oppression. Maybe, that is, that we'll grow into Epiphany people, proclaiming the Good News, shining with the light of Christ. Amen.