

Third Sunday After The Epiphany – Christina Smerick

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

I preached on these very texts three years ago this month; this is the first time that's happened to me as a lay preacher and it's a weird experience. I **love** Jonah, and the temptation then, as now, is to just nerd out about him for a while. But in the year of our Lord 2018...this is not the time for rambling; I don't know that we have the luxury of that. We do need to pay attention, though, to what Jonah does and how he does it, and how his message to Nineveh, so long ago, is echoed in Jesus' own call to repentance in Mark. Something's happenin' here in our lectionary this morning, something that feels....urgent.

Part of why I love Jonah is because he is really, really human. He is asked to preach, not repentance, please note, but 'AGAINST Nineveh', for it's been so wicked it has gotten the Lord's attention. There is no 'good news' here, not directly—just doom! That's no fun—people always like to shoot the messenger when he brings bad news. No wonder Jonah does his level best to avoid this task. Why did Jonah procrastinate? Well, Nineveh was a huge, foreign city in Assyria, a country that had been oppressing Israel for years. He was being asked to go into enemy territory, by himself, and tell them they were doomed. Now that is some scary stuff.

Now in many ways Jonah the prophet is us at our worst, whiny and resistant, knowing God but not wanting to follow Him, and ticked off (spoiler alert) when God doesn't smite the people he thinks deserve smiting. He is on one long sustained pouty fit throughout this book. When he finally gets around to doing what God asked of him, you can just see him resentfully, fearfully stomping through the hated, godless city of Nineveh, wondering why the God of Abraham is sending him to the den of iniquity, the Enemy, the people from whom No Good Can Come... shouting, tellingly, a message without hope: "You're doomed! *Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*"

We may share much with Jonah, as we may be called to preach against a willful, doomed nation; and like Jonah, we may be tempted to procrastinate. But for us, I think, it's weirdly worse. We live in the country we need to preach to; those who may need to hear *forty days and...* are not strangers but friends, or bosses, or family members. So we procrastinate too, maybe not to the point of being eaten by a fish, but nevertheless we delay; we wait; we hope the problems fix themselves without our input. But like the white moderate Christians of Martin Luther King's day, who preached 'wait, wait' at those demanding justice, we may have to realize that our urge to avoid, to be quiet, is not just coming out of Protestant niceness, or even fear of conflict, but rather from, dare I say it, **disobedience to God.**

And the tricky thing, too, is that Jonah is preaching what we must preach, and that's a hard word for Protestant evangelicals, so focused on 'individual sins,' to hear. Nineveh was initially doomed because of its **social and collective sins—for sins are not just found in the individual heart, but in the very structures and systems we participate**

**in.** It is only when they take it upon themselves to repent, to turn away from their wickedness, down to the very animals, that the doom is avoided. And Jonah, ironically, wasn't the agent of that! He brought the doom—but the people of Nineveh are the ones who had hope that with change, doom could be avoided. And because God is merciful and abounding in steadfast love, **even for pagan domineering foreigners**, their faith—in a God not their own—made them 'well'..... Isn't that **weird**? Doesn't that just blow your mind? And—and maybe this is part of what we have to learn from Jonah, pouting under his plant—he didn't have to do it all, and he didn't have to like the results. He just had to preach. Sometimes the smallest tasks seem the biggest.

When we turn to Paul, we see that the Corinthians are also called to turn away from their habits—again not of individual sins, but of their use of social labels and institutions as the source of meaning and identity in their lives. Paul says, "*What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For **this world in its present form is passing away.***" The urgency that finally propels Jonah into the great city is the same urgency flowing through Paul's letter: Turn from your ways! Now! The kingdom of God draws near! It's in the cry of Jesus, using the same words.

What is our cry, to our nation? Repent, turn away, America, because your—our—power is a delusion, our security a myth. Repent of every idol you...WE... have collectively raised in place of God. Repent of our lack of faith, repent of our disbelief that the old is passing, repent of our clinging to the past as if it ensures the future, when God is the only one who does that. Repent of our collective sins, our racist institutions, our sexist corporations, our xenophobic government. The old is passing away.

But we are not just called to repentance, although it's a great place to start. God does not seek supplicants who grovel at his feet, but partners in the kingdom of God. Right after Jesus' call to repentance comes a call of recruitment, a call to lay down the nets and follow him—and every disciple hears and comes **right away**. No procrastination here! Gosh, think of it. My house is never so clean as when I have a chapter or article due. I can find such creative, justified ways to dawdle, I should have an honorary degree in it. And these dudes—they're not just avoiding writing a paper. They're abandoning their families, leaving everyone and everything they know, to follow some dusty stranger.

These first disciples truly did act as if they had no wives or families, in that they *immediately* left their ships, their nets, their livelihoods and their households, to follow Jesus. Do we hear the uprooting of all social convention any longer, in Jonah, in Paul or in Mark? Married or single, business owner or beggar, domesticated woman or prostitute—these labels are meaningless in the kingdom of God. They are not who you are. This is good news indeed for those whom Jesus always goes to first: the poor, the marginalized, the diseased, the outcast—those without proper label or skin color or gender.

This is less-good news for those of us benefitting from the status quo, from having the right papers of citizenship, the right skin tone, the right gender identity, the right biological sex. How easy is it to ignore the call to repentance and discipleship when things are going well for you, personally?

But political posturing to the contrary, the United States—whether run by Democrats or Republicans or little green men—is not God’s kingdom. And if you want citizenship in God’s kingdom, you may have to burn your ID card from the other. There is no dual-citizenship in the Kingdom of God, I’m afraid. We like to pretend that God doesn’t make us choose—but remember, God is patient. God calls repeatedly (see Jonah). God knows we hide from that feeling of conviction, that sinking knowing feeling that we’re lying to ourselves about whose we are. God waits—but sometimes the time for waiting is over, and we have to either put down our nets, or turn our faces away from the One who calls. Three years ago, when I preached on these texts, I wrote that I was not ready to answer this call—that my benefits from being white and straight and married and middle-class and educated were working out for me, and the alternative was terrifying.

It’s still terrifying, no joke!

And three years ago, I wrote “But Jesus tells me, *The time is fulfilled, Christina, and the kingdom of God has come near...Follow me.*” And Paul cries out to me, “Christina, but *the appointed time has grown short...the present form of this world is passing away.*” And the psalmist prays, “*Trust in God, Christina, at all times...for those of high estate are a delusion...they are together lighter than a breath.*” And now, three years later, as I see our world, our nation, turning to xenophobia as a matter of policy and philosophy of governance; white Christians turning deaf ears to the cries of their brethren of color; the immigrant, the widow, the orphan, being denied human dignity while evangelicals stay silent; women of all sorts being harassed, touched, raped, dismissed while predatory male preachers amass thousands of followers... well, these words repeat in my head and grow louder and more insistent. And when I see 300k people in the streets of LA yesterday, 100K in NYC, and thousands in South Africa, the country of Georgia, Kenya, and Jackson, MS...I wonder how many of them were white evangelical Christians. I’m afraid I would not like the answer.

The kingdom of God may not have the boundaries and markers that make us comfortable. The kingdom of God may show up in Assyria, rather than the Holy City. The kingdom of God does not hold to national identities, or to any identity but that we are all, all, beloved children of God. So the time is come, folks. The old is passing away. The wickedness is evident. The sins are collective—ain’t none of us clean. It’s intimidating, and wild, and kind of unbelievable (and I’m not preaching apocalyptic here...am I?). The old curse ‘may you live in interesting times’ has come upon us. It’s here. We have some decisions to make, **now**, church.

But what’s weirdest of all, I have to tell you: I’m not afraid anymore.