

Third Sunday After The Epiphany – Christina Smerick
1.25.15

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

I think the book of Jonah is my favorite book of the Bible, which I admit is kind of weird. I know it pretty well, because the entire book is read during the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a High Holy Day for Judaism, the Day of Atonement, and Jonah is read because it is a succinct, memorable story expressing both the vast, universal reach of God's power (to the Assyrians and beyond! into giant fish!), and the depths of God's mercy. And the Ninevites provide us a model of repentance bar none.

But if I'm honest, I like the book for less serious and deep reasons. I like it because, as many commentators have noted, it is also basically one long sustained joke. We tend to fail to find the humor in the Bible, so trained as we are to be earnest Christians, devoted to Biblical study, careful not to offend God by giggling. But I had my eyes opened to the humor of Scripture by a student of mine, who presented, in History of Judaism, the humor of the First Testament. It was life-changing. Suddenly, sarcasm appeared, and irony! Jonah is a great example of this, because even the most uptight of us chuckle at his antics and his posturing. One commentator I read even heard his 'prayer', *I knew that you are a gracious God*, not in the sanctimonious tone we often mentally adopt for our lovely prophets, but rather as an extended whine: *I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love! Kill me now!* (David Plotz and Lawrence Wood). Jonah the prophet is us at our worst, whiny and resistant, knowing the truth of God's love but not wanting to follow Him, and ticked off when God doesn't smite the people we think deserve the smiting. He is on one long sustained pouty fit throughout the book. It is all in the reading of the line, as any good theatre person can tell you: imagine Jonah, 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!* Probably having a little schadenfreude at that, "well, if I have to be here, at least I get to tell them the TRUTH of what God thinks of them." Who among us has not felt that wonderful rush of self-righteousness, that deeply satisfying sense that we are bringing the thunder to Those People, and boy, they're gonna get it?!? Those People don't have to be our mortal enemies either—just those people who Don't Get It, whose Christianity is Wrong. (Those football-watching types. Those NON-football-watching types. Those 'reading The Message only' types. Those six-day creationist types. Those evolutionists.) Forty days, people! Aren't you going to feel stupid when you find out how WRONG you are?!

And what does God do to poor Jonah? Insult after injury. Those evil stupid ugly Ninevites stinking REPENT. They don't even really know the God of Israel, and yet they repent! And they don't just 'repent;' as Jacques Ellul points out, they repent all the way up to the structure of government itself—they repent collectively of their 'social sin.' And they repent all the way down to the animals. Richard Boyce describes it as "the unexpected faithfulness of the outsider, the other, the enemy," in comparison to the "unfaithful insider." We all know who

is found wanting. Nineveh repents on the word of an Israelite, and God forgives them and removes his threat. What does Jonah do? He stomps out to the desert, plops down, and pouts some more. *Kill me now!* God's mercy ticks him off.

The fact is that Jonah's behavior isn't special—very often, our behavior is a joke. Jonah and our other passages today come together, as they sometimes do, with a clear message, if we have ears to hear: all human constructs are frail, ephemeral, and will pass away. *The kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent!* Repent, Nineveh, of your social and collective sins—for sins are not just found in the individual heart, but in the very structures and systems we participate in. Repent, Corinthians, of your clinging to social labels and institutions as the source of meaning and identity in your lives—because the old is passing away. Repent, Jonah—because your life is like that of that plant, ready to wither and pass. Repent, nation—because your power is a delusion, your security a myth. Repent of every idol we have collectively raised in place of God, because it has been so long now since Paul said things were drawing to a close, and we're still here—and we have iPhones and self-driving cars and a sneaking suspicion that Paul might have been wrong, although we'll never admit it in our earnest Bible studies. Repent of our lack of faith, repent of our disbelief that the old is passing, repent of our clinging to the old and our refusal to believe that God speaks to our enemies just as much as he speaks to us.

Yes, we should repent, and we probably don't do it enough, because the God presented in Jonah, and in Jesus, is a God we don't deserve. He is a God who stretches out his mercy to the infidel, the violator, and the oppressor, just as he stretches out his mercy to us. He is a God who enters our world not as a conquering hero, but as vulnerable fragile human being, caught up in the forces of power and politics—*our* structures, *our* systems— and without name or title under which to hide. Boyce says that this is a god who “sticks with those he's stuck with,”—and shame on us for not being the same.

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. Mark's Gospel, in its urgent and speedy way, demonstrates this to us. I often emphasize (perhaps overmuch) to my students that the 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 Paul or in Mark? Look—go and see what Paul and Jesus seem to indicate (Paul does more than indicate, he just straight up says it): Your roles and identity markers, those things that you label yourself with and in which you find your meaning and purpose? Lay them aside. They are not who you are. Married or single, business owner or beggar, domesticated woman or whore—these labels are meaningless in the kingdom of God. *They are not who you are.* This is good news indeed for those to whom Jesus always goes 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 with sinful pride in belonging to the 'right' nation, the 'right' religion, the 'right' political party, the 'right' sexual orientation. Are you ready for the coming kingdom of God, in which your social identity will melt like ice in the blazing sun? Are you ready for Nineveh—the infidel—to outshine you in faith? Are you willing to let go of the privilege

afforded you by those labels? (There's a reason some folks claim that there's nothing harder to be than a rich Christian.)

I'm not. I'm not ready. I have business cards and a name plate on my door, and publications and degrees. I am safe—I'm a straight, white, married woman with a full-time job, a house, two cars, and two kids. My identity and my labels afford me tremendous ease in life, an ease that is invisible to me because I've never gone without it. And yet Jesus tells me, "The time is fulfilled, Christina, and the kingdom of God has come near. Follow me." And Paul cries out to me, "This is just my opinion, 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." Did you catch that? Those of high estate are not deluded—they are a phantasm, completely empty of real meaning. Everything in which we take pride is a delusion. It will pass away.

We are called to live as if this has already happened. Just try to imagine what that would look like if we really did. But who amongst us is fearless and trusting enough to try it? Who is Andrew? Who Simon Peter? What will I do? Will I go and pout in the desert? Cling to my fantasy? Or will I say yes to the in-breaking kingdom of God, and let it break me? What will *you* do?

I think it may be time to pray.