

Jonah, Reluctant Missionary – Ruth Huston

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Psalm 62.5-12; Mark 1.14-20; I Corinthians 7.29-31

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time. You gotta love Ordinary Time. After the high celebrations of both the church and national calendars that included too much eating, drinking, wiiing, xboxing, reconnecting, slothing and NOT exercising, ordinary time is looking pretty good isn't it? It's here that most of life is lived. How could we stand daily doses of celebration? I love ordinary time. And to be able to live in it with such wonder and presence of God makes the ordinary divine.

I drew the long straw today. In my perfect world, I would only preach when each of the 4 texts, including the Psalm, can be woven into an obvious, poignant theme. That's never happened. But today is different. I drew the long straw. So many themes, so little time. I've selected 3 in good homiletic fashion: the messenger, message, urgency.

Jonah

Jews read the Jonah story on Yom Kippur, their most serious, national day of atonement when they corporately ask God to forgive them for their sin. One of the most dramatic, powerful and smallest books in the bible—only 4 short chapters. The unknown author used as his tale a saga that had grown up around the prophet Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings. It has the delightful air of exaggeration in the details of Jonah's experiences. Ninevah, near Mosul in modern Iraq. According to Israel's perception, the Ninevites are the biggest, baddest bullies on the block. They belonged to the axis of evil and were number 1 on the terrorist watch list. This capital city of Assyria is described in the book of Nahum as the city of blood and endless cruelty. Their own historical records are full of details of their bloody exploits against surrounding peoples. These are the very people who just a few centuries earlier had wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel, God's chosen people! It wasn't just the Israelites who hated Nineveh—most of the ancient Near East hated them too. It's to these people that God sends Jonah to preach, against his will, warning them of their impending doom. When Jonah gets there, after a detour via the belly of a great fish, he preaches the shortest evangelistic sermon ever. Repent or God will destroy you in 40 days. Now, in the manner of Larry the Cable Guy on the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, that's fearmongering right there. The consummate hellfire brimstone sermon. Not much euangelion that I can hear. But it worked! The people heard and believed and repented. They fasted and donned sackcloth and ashes, all typical customs associated with repentance and mourning—Then the king heard and believed and donned. . . the animals heard, they believed, they donned! Now this is some immediate response to a 40-days-and-you-die-message —has a little Markan touch to it doesn't it? Jonah should have won Evangelist of the Year Award, at the least joined the Evangelist Hall of Fame. One message, a short and scary one at that, results in immediate belief and repentance.

And then it gets even better. The text says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” Now, it’s no small thing to report that God changed his mind. Cuz we’ve been saying for years that God never changes. So when I read a text that says he did, I sit up and take notice. I pay attention. God saw the actions of the people and changed his mind. What kind of God is this? Can God DO that? Can God change earlier decisions? Apparently, God is not bound to the past? Apparently, God responds in a dynamic way, God continually creates anew. And apparently his mercy is more powerful than our understanding of justice cuz if our kind of justice had ruled the day—you know the kind I’m talking about—that sense of fair play, reward for good behaviour, destruction for bad—the Assyrians would have got what was comin to em. But God grants life over death. God’s mercy extends, yes beyond Israel’s borders and reaches EVEN to the Assyrians.

Elizabeth Achtemeier says that God wants life and good, not only for all of us disobedient Jonahs, but for the Ninevians of the world—for the Judases and Hitlers, the Pol Pots and the Stalins, the Maos and Moons, the Osama bin Ladens and Saddam Husseins. God wants life for those who hung his Son on a cross and for those thieves who died beside him. God wants good even for the cattle as we read in Jonah 4.11 and for all the creatures on the face of the earth. It’s almost impossible for us to comprehend the “breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love for his creation.”

This calls for a totally different way of thinking about God. What a universalist message this book’s author writes against the narrow nationalism of postexilic Judaism that had become exclusivistic, nationalistic and xenophobic. This little Jonah book throws open the doors and widens the embrace of divine mercy. We North American Christians can surely find some connections here. Are we not narrow in our nationalism, often blurring the kingdom of empire with the kingdom of God, are we not exclusive about whom God loves, sometimes becoming overly preoccupied about who’s in and who’s out, are we not also fearful of others, to the point of even exchanging the quintessential Christian command to love our enemies for a virtual feeling of safety and security against the Ninevites of our world? Speak to us Jonah! We hear you. Loud and clear.

Mark

In the Markan passage, Jesus is the messenger of repentance, just like Jonah. Only Jesus seems to be willing, unlike Jonah. Jesus’ message is way more inviting than the fear-based sermon of Jonah. “The kingdom of God is at hand, it’s here. Repent and believe in the Good news of God.” And of course that good news of God is no other than the messenger himself! The kingdom of God is here cuz Jesus is here. This is the point where, when I lexio divined this passage in preparation for this week’s homily, my heart was touched. The Good News is Jesus. The messenger is Jesus. The messenger is the message—and it’s good news to those who hear it. And if the hearers don’t respond they will, as Jonah pronounced to the Assyrians, in fact die. And I’m not talking about hell after death. I’m talking about hell before death. I believe in life before death as much as life after. For any life lived not walking in the good news of God is

hell. I've tried it, I know what that's like and I will never not walk in the good news of God again. I will surely die.

And just like Jonah, fish have an important role in the plot. When Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee, he calls Simon, Andrew, James and John (aka Sons of Thunder—Dr. Jim Reinhard says there's only 1 reason 2 men would be given THAT nickname—all of them fishermen—to follow him and he'll make them fish for people. And in typical Markan fashion and just like the Assyrians in the Jonah story, euthus—immediately, they left their father in the boat and followed Jesus. Must have been something quite compelling about the messenger and the message or perhaps the urgency of the tone, that makes the hearers immediately follow. I suspect they already knew Jesus and were drawn to this good news of God.

Corinthians

At first read of the Corinthian text, this 21st century, North America woman and more importantly, wife, jolts at the incredulity of such words from St. Paul, the patron saint of this very church and the third messenger in this week's texts. He recommends to his hearers, in his equally urgent message to that of Jonah and Jesus, to live in the way of the hos me, "as if not." Verse 29, "Let those who have wives be as if they had not a wife, those who mourn as if they were not mourning, those who rejoicing as if they were not, those who buy as if they had no possessions, etc." I don't know of a wife who'd be too pleased at a husband who lived as if he had not a wife. But I don't want to be too hard on St. Paul—after all, he's reflecting his culture as we all do—and the worldview in 1st century Christian culture was a tad bit dualistic. And we can see evidence of it in this text certainly. Paul seems to infer that the good news of God can't be lived in the husbanding, mourning, rejoicing, buying—the ordinary time. And that true, good-news-of-God-work is living detached from these people and things. How contrary to a holistic view that suggests that it's in ordinary time that we see and hear God best. He also thought Jesus was returning immediately, certainly within his generation. Verse 31 says that the present form of this world is passing away. So there's an urgency here about Paul and his message that we can surely understand. Live, then, as if you're not in bondage to other people and things. Attach yourselves, instead, to the good news of God cuz it's so good and there's so little time that you're to live in the world of "as if not."

Three messengers: Jonah, Jesus, Paul. Three messages: repent or die, repent cuz the good news of god is here, live as if not. All urgent messages, all requiring a response from the hearers. This good news of god is too good, too urgent to ignore. If we do, we'll surely die. May we hear and respond.