

Homily – January 21st, 2024 – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time



A common thread from the three Scripture readings we just heard from, is that they are all “call stories”; someone is being called by God. And, like all Scripture stories, they are not just stories about people during Biblical times, but they are speaking to us here and now. In the first story, God calls Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and preach repentance to them. In the second reading, Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians says that God’s call is a call to urgency. If you’re married, fine, but don’t plan on having children. If you just bought a piece of property, fine, but don’t build a house on it or plant a crop. In other words, Paul says, don’t make long term plans because the Kingdom of God is at hand. The future is about to be fulfilled. And if that’s so, then it can’t be business as usual, otherwise you will miss Christ’s return, which Paul thought would happen in his own lifetime. Then we get to the Gospel where we have a more obvious call, the call of the first four Apostles, Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

While I know the gospel story of the call of the first four Apostles is freshest in your mind, I’d like to go back and explore the Jonah story, a story you are all familiar with. The reason I want to do this is because I find myself more aligned with how Jonah responded to God’s call than how the Apostles “immediately” left their nets and followed Jesus. I’m sure it wasn’t that instantaneous, but let’s look at Jonah, nonetheless.

Some context is helpful. Jonah is a prophet from Israel. The archenemy of Israel was Assyria. The Assyrians were brutish, violent, oppressive and made life miserable for the Israelites. Jonah received a call from God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the enemy country. Jonah thought God was crazy to ask him to go to the center of the beast and bring God's message of repentance to these hateful heathens. Jonah wants nothing to do with the Assyrians, and who could blame him?

This is where I really begin to relate to Jonah. He decides to head to the nearest port, jump on a ship, and head in the opposite direction. The first people to hear this story were Israelites, and they probably would have cheered on Jonah for not going to Nineveh as the Ninevites deserved to wallow in their own sins for a while. That ought to teach them. It's the "silent treatment" we've all used on others.

So, even though Jonah disobeys God, God has a way of bringing him around and bringing us around, too. Once onboard a boat full of pagans and heathens, a storm erupts, and the boat is about to sink. While the pagan sailors **pray** for an end to the storm, we are told that Jonah was **asleep**. The sheer irony of this story continues. The heathen sailors ask all kinds of questions about how this storm came upon them, only to conclude that Jonah must be the problem. So, they throw him overboard where he is swallowed up by a whale. The whale takes him back to where he was supposed to go in the first place, to Nineveh, and spits him up on the shore there.

Once in Nineveh, the very place he doesn't want to be, he says to these pagans, ***"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*** which translates into, "I have no use for you people; I am not here of my own free will. If it were up to me, I would have God send down lightning bolts to burn you up. I wouldn't give you forty minutes much less forty days to reconsider your sinful ways. So, shut up and repent even though you don't deserve God's repentance. Don't make my job with you any harder than it has to be. I'm only here on God's orders and because the whale had indigestion."

The Ninevites, to Jonah's surprise and disappointment, are fantastically receptive to his message. Every one of them, from the King of Assyria down to the animals, put on sackcloth and repented for their sins. This is not the result Jonah wanted. He wanted these pagans to experience God's punishment and wrath, but God gave them mercy and forgiveness instead. Pouting and disappointed, Jonah is so upset he prefers to die. He says to God, "I knew you were gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in mercy." Then he adds, "How dare you show such mercy to people who don't deserve it, so it's better for me to die than to live."

The story is extremely subversive because it insists that your enemy may be more open to God's redeeming love than you are. The Israelites, who heard the Jonah story, were probably as infuriated with God as Jonah was. It's not just a story about a man; it's also a story about a nation. The Jews had a call from early on in their history to be a light to the world, to show the world the redeeming love of God. They didn't live up to that calling.

Over 2000 years after the Jonah story was told, Jesus does something similar. He tells the story of the Good Samaritan. To a Jewish audience, Jesus tells a story where the enemy of the Jews, a Samaritan, is the hero of the story. How dare he paint someone, so obviously tainted with sin and evil, in such a good light? And how dare he paint us, the Chosen One, as the ones lacking compassion?

The Jonah story is our story. Enough with saying how stupid Jonah or the Jews were. The mirror is now held up to our faces. To some degree we all suffer from what Jonah suffered from, a dualistic mind. In the dualistic mind, there are always the good guys and the bad guys, the sinners and the saints, the deserving and the undeserving, Us and Them. But in this story, the dude who sees himself as *us* is furious because of how chummy God and *them* have become. Jonah is so furious that he'd rather die than live with the tension.

When God first went looking for prophets, not one of them raised their hand and said, "Pick me!" They were all reluctant, and the most reluctant of them all was Jonah. Yet, here's the brilliance of God, that God would use the little that Jonah offered him and was still able to convert the hearts of the 120, 000 souls of Nineveh. Jonah had to learn the slow and hard words of today's psalmist, "***Teach me your ways, O Lord, teach me your ways.***" When we dare to say the same, "Teach me your ways, O Lord," and when we let go of our dualistic minds, we become the kind of people God always intended us to become. The kind of people who can even love their enemies.

~Fr. Phil

