

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B

RCL

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:6-14

Mark 1:14-20



The Collect

The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

AMEN

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

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.

Psalm 62:6-14

Nonne Deo?

6 For God alone my soul in silence waits; *
truly, my hope is in him.

7 He alone is my rock and my salvation, *
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.

8 In God is my safety and my honor; *
God is my strong rock and my refuge.

9 Put your trust in him always, O people, *
pour out your hearts before him, for God is our
refuge.

10 Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath, *
even those of low estate cannot be trusted.

11 On the scales they are lighter than a breath, *
all of them together.

12 Put no trust in extortion;
in robbery take no empty pride; *
though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it.

13 God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, *
that power belongs to God.

14 Steadfast love is yours, O Lord, *

for you repay everyone according to his deeds.

Mark 1:14-20

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

SERMON

We've got two stories today that challenge human understanding. In the old Testament reading, Jonah, smelling of fish guts, walks through a foreign city screaming something about the end of the city, and the population of the city, all 120,000 of them, believed him. In the New Testament story, Jesus encounters two brothers working with their father and says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men". Immediately Simon and Andrew quit their jobs and walked off, leaving their father to pick up the slack.

That is NOT my understanding of how things work in the world. In my understanding, the city of Nineveh would have run Jonah off as a crazy person, and Simon and Andrew would have done what was righteous, stayed and cared for their father. When we're given such challenging stories, we tend to spiritualise them

rather than embracing them, insisting that by Nineveh we aren't really speaking of the ancient Assyrian city located on the outskirts of Mosul in modern-day northern Iraq, but really the heart of the believer, or some such. I'm not a fan of twisting Bible stories to make me feel more comfortable. I'd prefer to take such stories as indicators of my need for humility for Bible stories relate things too wonderful for my understanding.

Here's what I mean:

A family of fleas, living comfortably on the haunches of a large dog, were discussing their understanding of the world about them with their children – passing on the wisdom of countless flea generations, just as all good parents do.

“We are blessed”, Father Flea said, “for we live in a place where there is plentiful food, and beneath our feet the ground is warm. Though the winds of winter howl

the fur above us keeps us safe.”

“That is so”, replied Mother Flea. “But we are always to remember to be grateful lest the Cruel Claw or the Terrible Teeth make an ending of us.” They were a religious family of fleas.

As time passed, Brother Flea became less willing to accept Mother Flea’s stories of the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth at face value and even came to question the stories of Dog which their parents told them. “I don’t think any of that makes any sense”, said Brother Flea to his sister. “A great claw arriving out of nowhere? Teeth just appearing? It all runs counter to what I can see with my own eyes. I think mom is a little soft in the head. You know how old people get.”

“That’s awful!” replied Sister Flea, clearly horrified. “Mom wouldn’t tell us about the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth if they weren’t real. What about the

warm ground beneath our feet? The warm fur over our heads and all the good food we want? You think that just happens? Mom says all we have comes from Dog.”

Brother Flea wasn't convinced. “Yeah...I have never seen Dog, so ... I'm grateful for the good things we have, but I don't need Dog to explain any of it. I think it's all just myth and old people stories!”

“You don't believe in Dog??” Sister Flea exclaimed, horrified. That exchange, sadly, opened a gulf between the siblings that was only to grow more painful the rest of their lives.

Ironically, Brother Flea, though he could never believe in an invisible Dog, developed into a young flea noted for his loving and charitable personality. Everyone who met him was uplifted by him, and he never failed to come to the aid of those in need. His love of life, his gratitude for all those about him, his loving re-

relationships with everyone he met, friend or stranger, was legendary.

Sister Flea, however, became more and more obsessed with doing what she understood she must do to avoid the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth, which she saw as the punishment inflicted by Dog on those who failed to believe. She was a powerhouse of good deeds caring for the less fortunate, just like her brother, but her actions were always tinged with the edge of one who was acting from self-interest and fear. She became more and more strident, and more and more bitterly judgmental toward those around her. She was particularly harsh toward Brother Flea who she chided at their every meeting for his lack of belief.

“Don’t you fear Dog’s judgment?”, she asked, incredulously.

“No”, he replied, smiling. “I don’t believe in Dog, so

I don't believe in a judgment."

"Well, why are you forever visiting the sick, and giving to good causes? You wouldn't do these things unless you believed in Dog. You just don't want to admit it." Sister Flea just couldn't wrap her mind around good deeds done with no expectation of reward.

Brother Flea shook his head. "I don't know why I do those things. I see somebody suffering and it's like it's happening to me. It's like other people's itches make me itch and I just can't ignore them. Something in me won't let me be."

"It will do you no good!" she shouted. "You are powerless to gain salvation by good works, but only that ye believeth in Dog."

"Sister, I'm not looking for any sort of salvation! I'm just scratching an itch something within me won't let me ignore!"

“Humph!”, she huffed and silently prayed for her brother to come to Dog.

He sighed in exasperation. “Sister, everything you do is motivated by fear and judgment. You can’t appreciate your many blessings through such a fog of fear. You can’t reach out to others in love because of your need to stand as judge over them. Can’t you see that if you spread kindness with the same zeal you spread fear and judgment, how much better it would be for you and all about you? If you could let go of the fear that seems to direct everything you do and instead realize what a blessed place you live in, if you could take pleasure in those who surround you, things would be so much better for you. Now, I have to go. I’m due at the hospital for my shift. Be well!”

“Beware that you are not deceived”, she retorted, “for the illness of the flesh reflects the illness of the soul.”

Sister Flea could be a bit of a load.

One day, Sister Flea was in the midst of a tirade with her brother over his failures to heed her when, without the slightest warning, from above came awful, terrible teeth. Before either of them could react, she was caught up in them and crushed to paste before she could even call out! As quickly as they had appeared, the Terrible Teeth withdrew above the fur, leaving no sign of Sister Flea.

For a moment, Brother Flea stood dumbly, unable to absorb what had happened. Then the horror of it broke upon him like a flood, and he dropped to his knees in heart-rending tears crying out, “Oh my sister, my beautiful sister! If only it could have been me instead, for I have been filled with blessing and you found only fear and judgment! If only you had had more time, I just know you could have come to live into the light!”

A silly story, perhaps, but one which illuminates the very human need to act from self-interest rather than love, and to explain away those actions of God which we cannot understand. Ours is not to explain God away. Ours is to act in accordance with the urging of the Holy Spirit within us.

We can get terribly connected to our traditions and forget that God calls us to bring light to His Creation. We find ways to forget that we are each given into the care of the other. We fail to let go of our need to judge, so as to open our hearts to the needs of others. To live into the light, it is necessary to connect each day with that urging within us toward love and compassion – the still, quiet one whose passing would not break a bruised reed nor quench a dimly burning wick. That is the working of the Holy Spirit within you. Act from the Holy Spirit’s urging, as close as your own heartbeat.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

G.K. Chesterton predicted that we shall not perish for want of wonders, but from want of wonder. The world is filled with wonders we choose not to see. Take this sermon. Facebook offered me this story about a family of fleas as a memory from years ago that I no longer remember writing. That Facebook memory sounded so... “right”... for today, that I trashed the sermon I had started and used this instead, thinking what a wonder it was that Facebook would provide me a sermon from a memory of long ago! Then, I needed hymns. I pulled up a bulletin from several years ago and stopped dead when I read the title of that sermon: “Brother Flea”. It was the same story!

[Here’s another wonder. We’ve spoken of the #RACK program. Elliot Gollihue wrote this week: “Folks, I have something very amazing to share with you. I am

sure some of you may not believe this but people of faith will. Thursday evening. I am sitting with Lea Ann and am very emotional about Cody. We are both crying uncontrollably. Behind our couch, we have a Cody Shrine built with pictures and his Bible. As we are comforting each other, we heard a noise. Lea Ann gets up to investigate.

I looked at Lea Ann's face and she put her hands to her face ! I got up to see what she was looking at only to discover Cody's bible had fallen onto the floor from the fireplace hearth. We were stunned and in disbelief. Nothing could have caused that. In Cody's bible is a ribbon or marker . I opened it up to see what it was on only to discover Isaiah 40:31 ...Cody's favorite verse...and it was circled! I have never felt more comfort in 8 months than I have just now! People, God is real! He loves us! I am eternally thankful for what just

happened!”]

We shall not perish for want of wonders, church, but from our need to explain away the wonders we experience.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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