

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62: 6-14
Mark 1:14-20

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 Page 669, BCP

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

Now 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

Once, many years ago, in the days of steam, an enormous locomotive stopped working. No one at the local shops could do anything to repair it. A specialist was sent for, and duly arrived with a Gladstone bag full of specialist's tools. The specialist carefully examined the locomotive, then, extracting a tiny silver hammer from his Gladstone bag, he stepped up to one cylinder and tapped it with the hammer. Immediately, the giant beast sprang to life!

All were amazed! The specialist submitted his bill, in the amount of \$20,202.00. Management asked why the bill was so high for so little work. The specialist replied, "That's \$2 labor, \$200 travel expense, and \$20,000 for knowing where to hit a locomotive with a little silver hammer."

Putting the right person in the right place at the right

time makes a huge difference! It's a lesson we have to learn over and over. Individuals do matter. It is God's business to call the right guy with the right little silver hammer to the right locomotive at the right time. It is the individual's job to pay attention to the call and to respond to it, recognizing that God is NOT going to leave you alone until you respond.

I mean that quite literally. God can be infinitely insistent. When my cats decide that it's time to feed the cats, they will claw at my leg, meow pitifully, jump in my lap, and walk on the keyboard. If I still don't get up and feed the cats, they will climb onto shelves and begin knocking things off to shatter on the floor. God is like that in spades. You are what He needs and He will knock things off your shelf until you pay attention. It is this insistence of God which we refer to as “call”, or sometimes “irresistible grace”.

Today, we have two stories of response to call – response by Jonah, and response by Jesus. In both cases, the one responding is an unlikely specialist to be called. In both cases, their response makes a difference.

Jesus is the more familiar, of course, but think of who he was, and who he was to confront. Jesus was a working class Jew from way up north. Eventually, he would go toe to toe with the representative of the Roman Empire, Pontius Pilate. That makes Him a pretty unlikely specialist to be called, but He was, without question, the RIGHT specialist for the job.

We think we know all about Jesus, but for most of us all we know about Jonah is that he had an unpleasant experience with a whale. This does Jonah a disservice. There's more to this book than just a fish story. Jonah was the exactly correct person to be called to Ninevah, because, against all odds, the Ninevites paid attention to

Jonah, and that was completely unforeseen. We need to know something about Nineveh to understand HOW astonishing that was.

To begin with, the site of Nineveh still exists. It is in present day Iraq, across the river from present-day Mosul. It was the capital of the Neo Assyrian Empire which existed from the 10th Century BCE to the 7th Century BCE. The Neo Assyrian Empire did not play well with others. They were land pirates. By the 8th Century BCE, under their leader, who rejoiced in the really neat name of “Tiglath-Pileser III”, they had grabbed everybody’s land right up to the Mediterranean, and Egypt into the bargain. This is not nice. It’s very naughty to take other people’s land. Jonah felt this very sharply because some of the land they took was, in fact, Israel, and he lived there. God instructed him, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has

come up before me.”

The book of Jonah tells us that Jonah was the son of Amittai. In Hebrew, “Amittai” means “truth”, so Jonah is the son of truth, and he is being directed by God to speak truth to the pirates. This is not an appealing prospect to Jonah. It would be like a rabbi being told by God to speak truth to Berlin in 1939. Since a good part of their wickedness had to do with grabbing Israel and killing a lot of folks, you can understand that Jonah was not keen on doing that. It’s not surprising that Jonah took a pass, and shipped the other way. It’s not right, but it’s not surprising.

The text tells us,

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Thereafter followed the unpleasantness with the storm, the sailors throwing him overboard, and the business with the great fish. Having learned his lesson, Jonah has now gone to Nineveh like God told him to do in the first place. That's what I mean when I spoke about God's insistence. If God has need of you, he will knock stuff off your shelf until you decide to pay attention. God needed Jonah for this job and someone else wouldn't do. Jonah was exactly the right specialist for the job in exactly the same way Jesus was exactly the right specialist for his time. Jonah was the prophet called by God to address the sins of Nineveh, and they weren't even Jewish!

Clearly, when things are going along well, with the people celebrating that they are God's, there's no need for a prophet. You can search the Scriptures front to back and you're not going to find a prophet sent to the

people who delivered the word of God, “Great work there, dude. Keep on keepin’ on.” Prophets bring a message of repentance – a message to change your direction. Most prophets discover soon after that people don’t like to hear a message of repentance, and that they are quite capable of doing some horrible things to people who trouble them with messages of repentance.

Jonah is the exception. Our text tells us:

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.

We can’t be too literal here. If Jonah walked at 2 ½ miles per hour, ten hours a day for three days, that would make the city 75 miles wide. The ruins of Nineveh, those we didn’t bomb during the Iraq war, are still

there, and it wasn't that big. The point, however, is that Nineveh was, for the time, a large city and Jonah's word was taken up by the city before he had gotten a third of the way finished.

Now, that's passing strange, don't you think? Nineveh and the Assyrians did not worship the God of our fathers. What would be the reaction, do you think, if someone from a country far away walked into Ashland on US 23 and proclaimed, "Forty days more and Ashland shall be overthrown" as he walked from AK Steel to about 13th Street? Yet, when Jonah did this,

“And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.”

Jonah is the exception. A people who shouldn't have listened, did. Jonah was clearly the right specialist for this particular locomotive.

Could God have used someone else just as effectively? Those who want to view God as being able to do anything would say “Yes”, and perhaps they are right, but I think God accomplishes His will by using the right tool for the job rather than by perversely pounding the wrong tool into appropriate shape, and that means that I believe each of you is important. I believe each of you is called as a specialist to some portion of God’s Creation in need of your, and only your, attention.

Anthony De Mello recounts a story:

A female disciple smiled. She once had a cook, she said, who made the most wonderful hash in the world. “How on earth do you make it, my dear? You must give me the recipe.” The cook's face glowed with pride. She said, “Well, ma'am, I'll tell yer. Beef's nothin', pepper's nothin', onion's nothin'. But when I throws myself into the hash, that's what makes it what it is.”

It is in this spirit we must approach a call from God.

Something in God's Creation needs the touch of your, and only your, hand. We must respond to such a call by throwing ourselves into the hash.

What does that mean? Well, it means what Moss Hart meant when he said, “He gives nothing who does not give of himself.” It means helping Alfreda serve at the Community Kitchen by offering grace before the meals rather than just sending money and holding yourself apart from the suffering of those who cry for help. To my very great astonishment, it means a corporation who sticks with a man through two bouts of rehab to reveal the child of God beneath the burden of the addiction.

This week, Time did a follow-up on the story of Ted Williams, the homeless man from Columbus with the golden voice. A year ago, the Columbus TV station saw him panhandling and filmed it. For a contribution, he

would speak in this wonderful old school radio voice. It went viral on Youtube. People rushed to help, including Kraft Foods who let him do a voice-over for Homestyle mac and cheese. Someone else clothed him. Someone else fixed his teeth. Entertainment Tonight got him in rehab.

You know what happened. He failed. He got drunk. He slipped from the headlines. Kraft, Dr. Phil, Entertainment Tonight, all these people who had helped had played it for the headlines. There was nothing left to be gained in following a drunk down.

But they did! There's no reason to stick with a drunk. A drunk is hopeless. A drunk is a verdict, not a person. They didn't stick with a drunk. They stuck with Ted Williams, a child of God. They stayed with him through a second bout in rehab and he succeeded! That voice you hear on Kraft Homestyle mac and cheese

commercials is his. He is the official voice of the New England Cable News. As he said in the interview as he showed the cameras his condo, “A year ago I was living in tents under bridges. Now I have a fireplace!”

This makes me insanely happy. There is no reason I can imagine for Entertainment Tonight or Kraft Foods to stick with him through the inevitable relapses that characterize addiction treatment, but they did. I can only imagine that God was working in the home of some decision maker, and that many things got knocked off his shelves. Hallelujah!

There are so many things wrong with the world we live in. Children of God are defined by their diseases and discarded under bridges and in cardboard boxes in alleys. Giant corporations, in pursuit of profits, discard workers. Even God’s people, called to minister to His world, called to be the specialists, fall into self-righteous

mutterings and stupid arguments and turn from their tasks. As I was leaving the Chapel of St. Starbuck one day this week, a huge truck had parked right smack against my driver's door, giving me about six inches in which to maneuver my not-inconsiderable bulk into my car. As I backed out, I saw the truck had a bumper sticker reading, "Please, Jesus. Protect me from your followers."

Somebody needs to have something knocked off his shelf! The specialist who should have shown this person that Christians are called to be servants of all hasn't done it. That leaves this man (I assume it's a man because no self respecting woman would be seen in such an abomination of a truck) believing bad things about Christians.

I suppose everyone toys with day dreams of making a big splash in the world, the idol of millions. That

seems to be what we honor in this country. But it is much more likely that you are called to be a specialist to demonstrate to the man in the truck the true nature of a Christian, and you didn't do it. Or maybe you are the specialist called to start a tradition of meaningful prayer before meals at the Community Kitchen, and you haven't gotten there yet. You cannot know when the call will come on your own, personal batphone to come with your own, personal little silver hammer and tap something that needs tapping. What you **can** do is to pay attention to the world around you. You **can** conduct yourself in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ every moment, whether you think someone's watching or not. It's fine to put a Christian fish symbol on the back of your car, but if you do, don't sneak into a handicap spot with that thing showing! It's fine to attend church and share your faith with others, but if you do, don't

laugh at racial jokes, or get all plumped up about hungry people who sneak into this country.

Be the voice of repentance for a sickened America.
You are the specialist. Bring your hammer.

AMEN

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

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