

Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Psalm 62:6-14, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20

“Now 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 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!”

We hear two stories of call in today’s readings. We hear the story of God’s call to the prophet Jonah, and through him, to the city of Nineveh. And we hear of Jesus’ call to his first disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

Our Old Testament passage today is perhaps the less famous part of the story of Jonah. Usually we think of Jonah running from God and being swallowed by a big fish. But when our passage begins today with God telling Jonah to *get up*, it is because Jonah is apparently still on the ground because the enormous fish that ate him had just vomited him back up.

We may remember the story of Jonah primarily as a story of a disobedient prophet who runs the opposite direction when God calls him to prophecy to a major city of his enemies. But in this passage, at last, Jonah is immediately responsive to God’s *second* call to him, as the disciples in the Gospel story are immediately responsive to Jesus’ call (in their case, the first time).

I really love the story of Jonah chapter 3, and I’m sorry our reading this morning skips over my very favorite part. After Jonah prophesies that Nineveh will be overthrown, we heard that all the people of the city proclaimed a fast. But we jumped over the section where the story tells us that fasting and repentance were for *everyone* – every living thing. My favorite part in this story is when even the cows fast, and wear sackcloth!

(It’s not immediately clear to me that wearing sackcloth is more penitential for a cow than its usual lack of clothing, but I love the image – the animals clucking and mooing to God with sackcloth on).

Why is *everyone* in Nineveh so immediately responsive to the words of God from Jonah the prophet?

Well, for one thing that word Jonah used – the word “overthrown” – “Nineveh will be overthrown” - is a word with a history.

This is the word that describes what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities from the Book of Genesis that God destroyed with fire and sulphur from the sky. The cities whose land remains a desolate wasteland to the present day. Nineveh, too, in the Book of Jonah, is described as a city whose wickedness, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, has provoked an outcry to God by many people. The threat and the terror of what might now happen to Nineveh is intense.

So perhaps it is not so surprising that even the animals are involved in repentance in this story. No living thing, not even plants, survived the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And so here in this story of Jonah, the city of Nineveh recognizes that the fates of all its inhabitants are bound up together, and they cry out to God together for His mercy.

But this powerful word “overthrow” actually has other meanings we find in Scripture, as well. Its root meaning is simply to be “turned”. Sometimes to be turned upside down – “overturned”, but also to turn as in the story of the plagues of Egypt, when the waters of the Nile are “turned” to blood – this is same word.

But this turning is not always bad. The same word describes how the hard rock of the wilderness was “turned” to a spring of water for the children of Israel during their escape from Egypt. God “turned” the curse of Balaam in Deuteronomy into a blessing. And in the prophecies of Jeremiah, God promises to “turn” Israel’s sorrow into rejoicing. And in Hosea, God “turns” in compassion toward His people. All the same word.

So what did God's word actually mean concerning Nineveh when he told Jonah to proclaim "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overturned"?

Well, if we look to what actually happens, we discover that Nineveh is not destroyed. Instead, it is transformed. The people repent of their wickedness and turn to God. A city that is the historic enemy of Israel enters into a relationship with the God of Israel. A relationship built on God's response of mercy and compassion towards them.

Our translation of this passage today said that God "changed his mind" and did not bring destruction, but I believe a better translation of that word is "relented". God "relented" and withdrew that worst possible outcome because He is compassionate and responsive to His creatures when they turn their hearts to Him.

And it may well be that *that* was God's plan from the start, and He didn't change His mind at all – that His initial plan was that within forty days Nineveh would be "turned", transformed, converted into right relationship with God. Because God would have known that Jonah's prophecy would lead to repentance and not destruction.

While Jonah in the passage after our reading today actually gets angry that his prophecy does not lead to the catastrophic destruction he was apparently hoping for, God speaks the final word in the Book of Jonah in compassion – pointing out to Jonah in the final verse that Nineveh contains over 120,000 people whom God cares about "and also many animals!" The only character who really seems to crave destruction in the story of Jonah, is the prophet Jonah. God clearly craves repentance and transformation for His creatures.

And so we find that same desire in God in the words of Jesus from the Gospel according to Mark. Jesus cries out to the people of Galilee "the Kingdom of God has come near – repent - turn to God - and believe in the good news!"

He calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be transformed – to turn from fishermen into "fishers of men" – into evangelists and missionaries proclaiming the love and mercy of God. Their transformation takes longer than that of the city of Nineveh. After turning to God, they spend three years with Jesus learning more about who God is in preparation for going out and speaking of him to the whole world.

This is like the turning, the transformation for any of *us* as we are shaped into disciples of Christ. It takes time, and practice, and mistakes and repentance, and challenges, and courage to become people who know and love God and are able to speak and act before others out of that love. To be missionaries, as Fr. Malm also said last week - to follow in our Lord's footsteps by calling and inviting others to experience the compassionate and merciful love of Christ that can utterly transform us - in Church, in our lives, and in the world.

Today is the day of the annual meeting, when we set aside special time to think about and pray about the ways that Grace Church serves this mission of transformation in Christ.

To think and pray about how we train and teach our own members to turn into disciples.

To think and pray about how we witness to the love and invitation of God in actions of compassion and mercy to those suffering, sick, and in need.

And to think and pray about how we witness to the love and call of God in words through our ministries as a parish to those outside our walls, and through each of our personal ministries to the people in our own lives who are still yearning for and searching for that transforming love.

How can we, as a community and as individuals, share Christ's invitation to turn to him?

How can find and make and become disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, and John, whose own lives were turned upside down?

How can we become more like those disciples, who were so transformed by the mercy and love and invitation of Jesus, that they laid aside everything to follow Him?