

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday January 21 2024

The Third Sunday After Pentecost in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

+

The Call

“There is a reality beyond all facts of suns and systems, wealth and lands, houses and possessions. Solidity itself is but the shadow of a divine necessity, and there may be more truth in a parable than in a whole biography.” –George MacDonald

The first time Jonah was called by the Lord, he fled. He bought a one-way ticket west over the sea to the end of the world. A storm came. And to calm the storm, the sailors threw Jonah into the deep. But all was not lost. God sent a great fish to save him from death, to swallow him whole, but keeping him safe for three days and nights. In that dark, Jonah prayed from the belly of the beast, praying of how far he had strayed, how overwhelmed he had been by the waves and the weeds, how deep he had sunk, but that God had delivered him from all that, God had brought his life back, and now Jonah longed to see the splendor of the Holy Temple again, to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and to make good his vows to the most High. The fish released him, having traveled all the way to the belly of another beast, the brutal Assyrian empire, to the shores of their capital city of Nineveh. The prophet Nahum declared of this place: “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without prey...who has not known your cruelty?”

But Jonah was called a second time by the Lord: “Arise, go unto Nineveh.” Preach to them. Tell them that their time is short. And this time, Jonah doesn’t run away. He sets his face towards Nineveh, and proclaims a day of doom. And, by heaven, the people of Nineveh take Jonah at his word. They believe. From the greatest, to the least, they turn from their evil, in sackcloth and ashes. And God sees this, and joins in their repentance, turning from the doom foretold by his prophet.

The city of blood becomes the city of bloom, of hearts that blossom under heaven. As God had saved Jonah through a fish, God had saved Nineveh through him.

Jonah ultimately answered God’s call to be an Agent of God’s grace. And it all worked out. But his obedience is momentary, truly effective, but framed by such resistance. He was reluctant at first. And he was reluctant after. The book that bears his name ends with him grumbling about Nineveh’s providential blessing.

Jonah could not bear it. He could not fathom how God could stoop so low to care for the devil’s brood and even to deliver them from destruction. But no matter how devilish or vile, the Ninevites were God’s brood, and no matter how far or how deep Jonah could care, God would take him further, God would take him deeper, Jonah’s salvation was not his own, his salvation became the gateway for a Spirit and Power that could save even the evil Empire of his day, not by the sword but by the Word. Not by Vengeance but by Presence.

When the book of Jonah shows us Jonah himself sulking on an overlook, miserable that his enemies have had their happy ending, in no small part, thanks to him, when they show him doing this, we are meant to see the irony that the prophet's success has given him no peace. He was called by God. He answered. But rather than end his career in thanksgiving the scale of God's work through him, he ends it in resentment.

Jesus had a parable which touched on this, too. He told the tale of a son long-faithful to his father whole ended the tale in bitterness his prodigal brother who had returned from his disastrous time away to be greeted by the father with celebration and feasting the likes of which he had never seen.

When, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus called his first disciples, I wonder if they would have been so eager to follow Him if he had elaborated when he said "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men."

It is a whimsical image. To imagine Simon and Andrew as giants, perhaps in great boats that float on the clouds, like on the sea, they would cast their nets over villages and fields, and using those strong fisherman arms to pull up those nets with so many people caught within, pulling them all the way up to the heavenly courts.

Who could say no to such an offer? I also would imagine that the fishermen would have expected to sort the men that they caught. Like they did on earth, they would divide the good fish from the bad fish. The clean ones they would keep. And the unclean ones, well, they would throw them right back. They would be divine fishers and judges of those fish.

James and John certainly thought like this, and expected to play this role. At the start of Jesus' ministry, there was one village that rejected the messengers of Christ, a Samaritan village, in fact. Jesus was focused on Jerusalem, and they didn't like that at all. And so James and John asked an obviously leading question. "Do you want us to command fire come down from heaven, and consume them, like the prophet Elijah did?" This is their solution. If they aren't good fish, don't even throw them back into the water, throw them into the fire. Not only do they want to fish for men, and judge those men, they intend to be executioners, on a genocidal scale. Their intentions for that stubborn Samaritan city is not too far from Jonah's intentions for ancient Nineveh.

But Jesus rebukes them: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Would they have accepted Jesus' call if they had known that in their nets for men that there would have been Samaritans, Syrophoenicians, and even Romans! Would they have accepted Jesus' call if they had known that a tax collector named Matthew would have joined their ranks? Would they have accepted Jesus' call if they would have been strong enough to overcome their sense of self-righteousness to answer that call? I don't think they would.

Jesus said something to his disciples before he died: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." And unlike God in his call to Jonah who got right to point about the wideness of his mercy, which had him bolting to the hinterlands, Jesus does bury the lede. He employs an image that is true, but also could be heard in a way that the disciples' could bear, and gives them room to grow out of the old life and into that larger life. The beauty of Jesus ministry is that so many of his parables work like that. An easy way to hear it, and a hard way to hear it. And Jesus is perfectly fine with a parable serving as a kind of lock in a canal, where you start at a lower level and over time, if you stay in that lock, if you stick with the parable over the course of your life, the water level rises, and before too long, you are at a higher level than you were before, ready to move forward at a higher level.

This is the same thing that happens in a call from God. First it starts small. A word. A look. A dream. A seed. The beginning is always small, but the journey only grows in breadth and depth and length and height, and the fellowship, the crew ever more motley. Would we say yes if we knew that at the beginning? If we knew where the call of God would take us? Would we say “yes” if we knew not only how much we would lose, but how much we would gain?

How the love of God for us would get us all tangled up in the love of God for our enemies, whether personal, economic, or geopolitical, that our healing would promise the healing of our enemies, I’m not so sure.

Jonah struggled with this. The disciples struggled with this. And we shall, too. In a time of conflict on multiple fronts, enemy lines that cross the world and our homes, Jesus calls us to be his disciples, fishing for people, not to destroy, but to save. Lord save us from *our* righteousness and mercy, so very small and limited. Call us out of *our* goodness, into yours. Call us out of *our* time, into your time. Out of our world into your Kingdom.

Help us to repent and believe in your good news, for both us and them.