

## Revival Begins With Me

Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (Series B. 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany) Ps.62:5-12

Mark 1:14-20

*Once again the Lord spoke to Jonah. He said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to the people the message I have given you." So Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to walk through it. Jonah started through the city, and after walking a whole day, he proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!"*

Let us pray

Today, on the liturgical calendar, it is the *third Sunday after the Epiphany*. On the calendar of festival days, it is the *Feast of St. Titus*, pastor and confessor. On the synodical calendar, it is *Sanctity of Life Sunday*.

And the readings are equally diverse. In today's Gospel, four fishermen are made fishers of people by the Word of Jesus. In the OT reading, a reluctant preacher named Jonah, who was fish food for three days, preaches the Word to Nineveh. And the Word of God has its way of making alive what was dead.

There was a young, dedicated and reserved Christian girl reading her Bible on a bus. A pushy loud-mouthed, quarrelsome man sat down next to her and confronted her about the Bible. He asked, "Do you believe everything in the Bible?" And she said, "Yes, I do."

He kept on, "You mean to tell me you believe that Jonah lived for three days in the belly of a whale?" The girl answered, "Yes." The man persisted, "Well then how do you explain that?" The young woman answered, "I can't, but I believe it." The man became more agitated and said, "Lady, you should be able to explain whatever you believe!"

The young woman then said, "I don't know exactly how Jonah survived but I'll ask him when I get to heaven." Then, sarcastically, the man asked, "And what if Jonah didn't make it to heaven?" There was a pause, then she replied, "Then **you** can ask him."

The story about Jonah and the big fish has always been a fascinating story with children. It has something of a fairy tale quality about it. This is a story about Jonah, one of God's most reluctant prophets. He is told to go to Nineveh – that hated, despised, Near Eastern power that had caused so much suffering in Israel. Ancient Nineveh was the capital of Assyria - modern-day Syria - and old Nineveh was much in the news, similar to modern-day Syria. God's instruction to Jonah is to go and rescue Ancient Nineveh. But Jonah wants no part of that rescue mission.

Jonah says, in effect, that he would rather die than go to Nineveh. There is no point in going to Nineveh because the people won't listen; in fact, he would most likely be risking his life. The people of Nineveh were godless and wicked so why should he speak to them about God? They only deserved God's condemnation and punishment. Why should he try to give them a second chance? Besides, people like that *don't change*.

Yet God, as he often does, persists. Jonah attempts to ignore the call of God; in fact, he tries to get as far away from God as he can. He boards a ship for Tarshish, sailing in the opposite direction, but during a storm he is thrown overboard by the terrified sailors.

On his way to the bottom of the sea and to certain death, Jonah is swallowed by a big fish and, in the belly of this fish, Jonah cries out to God in prayer. After three days Jonah is coughed up head over heels on the sandy Mediterranean beach. He reluctantly goes to Nineveh, believing all the time that this is a big waste of time.

Jonah walks through this huge city of 120,000 calling out a simple message. There is no call to repentance, no message of God's love, only a threat, "*In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!*" It seems as if Jonah is making his message as offensive and as blunt as he possibly can. It seems as if he is looking for a reaction – a reaction of disbelief and rejection from the people of Nineveh.

But a miracle, the opposite happens. The entire city from the king down to the poorest on the street believed God's message. Everyone wears sackcloth and ashes and prays that God will not destroy them. Can you imagine Jonah's surprise and shock?

In spite of his reluctance, despite his half-hearted attempt at speaking God's message, regardless of his lousy attitude toward the people of Nineveh, and apart from his poor sermon, the whole city falls on its knees in repentance and prayer. In fact, we are told that it took three days to walk through Nineveh from one side to the other and Jonah had only walked for one day when revival broke out.

Most of the city hadn't even heard Jonah's message personally, perhaps hearing it from neighbours and friends. Yet the response is overwhelming. Jonah's **half-hearted** efforts resulted in Nineveh's **whole-hearted** response. Jonah was wrong. People like that *do* change. People *do* change.

The one person in the whole story who found it difficult to change was Jonah himself. Reading on, we find that Jonah becomes angry with God. Jonah wanted *justice* not *grace*, *punishment* not *forgiveness*.

What are we to make of this whole story about Jonah? As I said at the beginning, this Old Testament story makes a great story for children but what message does God want to convey to us adults today?

Most importantly, this is a story of God's love and mercy. Look how often God was patient with the hard-headed Jonah. If it were up to us, we would have given up on this idiot long ago. We would have come to the conclusion that he will never *change*; he is too wrapped up in his own ideas and his own world that he will never change.

But notice how God comes back to Jonah again and again. He doesn't give up. He even rescues him from the deep and orders a big fish to swallow Jonah. He is patient with Jonah's *half-hearted* effort in delivering his message and, to top it all off, he hangs in there when Jonah becomes angry with God saying, "*I knew it! I knew you would be loving and merciful. I knew you would go back on what you said and save the people of Nineveh!*" God was trying to convince Jonah that he loved the people of Nineveh as much as anyone else. Jonah was mad like hell and angry that God spared Nineveh. You see, my friends, it is not necessarily true that your enemy is God's enemy.

God hasn't changed one bit from the days of Jonah. The way we hurt people around us through our selfishness and lack of consideration and the way we hurt God with our sin must leave him upset and offended. And yet God doesn't let this get in the way of his love and mercy and, like he did for Jonah, he comes back to us again and again wanting us to love him, to trust him and to turn our lives around from self-centeredness and sin to lives of love and patience and understanding.

Just as God spoke his word through Jonah, as poor and inadequate as he was, God speaks to us through the pages of the Bible, through other people, through parents, neighbours and friends, calling us to trust him and believe in him as the God who loved us so dearly that he sent his Son, Jesus into this world to be our Saviour.

The first aspect of our calling is to enter into a *relationship with Jesus Christ* that is one of complete and utter trust:

- To come to him as he asks us to come - and to give to him our weariness, our burdens, our anxieties - and to receive from him those things he wants to give us - peace, hope, joy, truth, love, strength, wisdom....
- To come to him - and to follow him - wherever he leads - even if it be to a cross.
- To come to him and to learn from him.
- To come to him and to live in him.
- To come to him and to be made new by him and act as Christ's ambassadors of peace in the world.
- To be ones who minister God's reconciling love to the world.
- To be ones who bring God's word of forgiveness and hope and God's life-giving word to all who need it.

God has assured us that he will always be there for us to call on in times of sickness, sadness, and trouble in life and even in death. That's how God felt about the people of Nineveh and grumpy old Jonah. That's the way God feels about us now!

The other point that I would like to bring out is that people can *change*. There are those who say that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I lived without God and the church for years, until God revealed his truth to me through a friend at the age 19. My life changed from then on. Yes! With God, people do change.

A psychotherapist of many years once said that the one thing he had learned in counselling people with problems was that "*people almost never change. Change, real change, is uncommon.*" Perhaps this psychotherapist was having a bad day when he said that. Perhaps he was like Jonah - not believing that God has the power to bring about change in the lives and hearts of the people of Nineveh.

This is where faith comes in. *Faith* is the willingness to be amazed; shocked by the surprising changes that God can bring about in our lives. *Faith* is the willingness to be surprised at the depth and power of God's love for us and his constant willingness never to give up on us.

*Faith* is the willingness to believe that the Gospel can have a changing impact on our lives. *Faith* is the willingness to believe that, with God's power in our lives, we can change. The first words that Jesus preached were "*turn away from your sin and believe.*" They are as relevant to us today as they were when they were first spoken.

When we take God seriously, don't be surprised if he makes some radical and risky changes in our lives. In fact, just when we have our world settled, fixed or finished, God comes along with his amazing grace and turns our whole life upside-down.

That's what happened at Nineveh when Jonah preached. And that's what happens when God and his never-ending love touches our lives. Life is never the same. Finally...

Revival Begins With Me...

And With God, People Do Change.

Amen.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

We are back in a lock-down situation as the COVID-19 virus has not subsided, so let us all take time to pray, to encourage and call one another in the household of faith and ALL nurses, doctors, truck drivers, all essential workers etc.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your prayers, kind words, and condolences during this difficult time for our family. Just one correction *Barbara Priest Milenowski* passed away on Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021 and NOT on Jan. 3.

**Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:**

- God Is Here # 526
- Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word # 517
- Go, Make Disciples # 540

Let us pray: Almighty God, by grace alone you call us. Accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

January 24, 2021