

You all will recall from your biblical studies that the story of Jonah is one of call and response. Today the lectionary calls for us to hear from a section of chapter 3 however in order to get the full context and impact of Jonah I think we must consider the entirety of the book. So, let's look back at what happens in the first two chapters of Jonah and then I'll read chapters 3 and 4.

The book of Jonah begins with God calling Jonah to go to Nineveh. God calls out to Jonah, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Rather than heading toward Nineveh, Jonah sets out in the opposite direction toward Tarshish. What ensues is a whale of a tale, it is a story about God's persistence and Jonah's guilt, and Jonah's pleading and then God's redemption, that results in Jonah being spit up by a fish on dry land, and God calling to Jonah a second time.

This is where we begin our reading today, from chapters 3 and 4. Listen carefully for God's word to you this day:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the

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

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change God's mind; God may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God's mind was changed about the calamity that God had said would be brought upon them; and God did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The Lord God appointed a bush,^[a] and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Whether we consider ourselves the insider in God's story or the outsider, whether we would classify ourselves more as Jonah or the Ninevites, or the disciples or those to whom the disciples are sent, it matters not, because at one time or another we are each all of those possibilities. There are times when we are certain we've heard God speak, or we're at least certain we're doing something God wants us to do, like being kind to others, and then there are of course times when we are going about life doing things our own way without any concern for God's business with us.

And the thing we know from this story of Jonah and his prophesying to the Ninevites is that even the one who believes they are the insider, the one delivering the message of God, does not fully know God. There is a mystery about God that allows for things to shift, that allows for forgiveness to show up even when the proclamation of destruction has already been sent.

We are sometimes the ones called and we are sometimes the ones being invited to repentance, and sometimes we are both.

First, there is the call: God calls Jonah away from his life, to prophesy to the people of Nineveh. Jesus calls fishermen away from their lives, to learn at his feet, become his disciples, and spread Jesus' message.

In each there is a specific call where it is clear: Words matter, what we proclaim matters. Jonah cried out to the people of Nineveh, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Jesus proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[c] repent, and believe in the good news."^[d]

What we proclaim, what we call people to matters as much as what we are called away from. If we are only called out of something we wonder aimlessly with no direction. But, if we are called out and called to we have purpose.

We are called away from something and into something else. We are called away from our routine, planned, chosen lives and into uncertain service to God. We are called away from comfort and into discomfort. We are called from complacency, and into action.

For many of us, if not individually then at least collectively as a people, there has been a lot of aimless wondering. We have seemingly lost focus on the thing to which we have been called, a life lived in the ways of God, a life where we turn from ourselves, our own interests, and strive to live in the interests of the kin-dom of God.

Now the repentance: The people who hear are called to repent. Jonah as the mouthpiece of God, prophesying the destruction of Nineveh because of their following in ways that go against God's will, is inviting the people of Nineveh to change their ways, to repent from their aimless wondering, from their separation from God. Jesus goes throughout Galilee preaching a message of repentance, inviting people to turn from their ways and turn toward God's ways.

"The Ninevites' immediate response in repentance stands in stark contrast to Jonah's initial refusal to follow God's command. And the repentance of the city signifies 'the answer to social sin,' as philosopher Jacques Ellul insisted, because it combines 'the conversion of an entire population and its government.' Moved by this comprehensive act of contrition, God renounces the city's impending destruction."¹

¹ Price, Joseph L., *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, 270.

A complete about face not just by a few of the people who heard Jonah's message, but by the King himself, and thus the entire land. We know that was not the same response Jesus received in his call to repentance, but we see time and time again throughout Jesus' ministry where he calls people to view life in God differently than the way of the established religious institution, or prevailing empire, a call to repent from their separation of God, but also a call to something.

And, what about when we are both, the one called by God to and the one invited to repent? Throughout the book of Jonah we see Jonah being called and then repenting, the book ends with him angry, longing for death, rather than repenting of his anger toward God and for what, for the very things he knew to be true about God: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Yet, Jonah is angry when he sees those very traits of God enacted, not for him, but for the people to whom he was sent, the people to whom God called him to bring to repentance, are repentant and the one called is now left dismayed at the forgiveness shown to them upon their repentance.

I imagine what comes next is Jonah's apology to God for assuming that he had all the answers and knew exactly how God would and should act toward any of God's creation. I imagine what comes next is a dialogue where God invites Jonah to take a seat and hear God out even more clearly, explaining to Jonah that God's love for creation cannot be summed up in black and white, placed in boxes that have no fluidity. And, that in

fact, this is the very essence of God's relationship with humans who were created with free will, that we will turn from God, whether we literally flee in the other direction or choose not to repent, and that God sends us messages, messengers, nudges, encouragements, callings to return, so that we can in fact be protected, cared for, and embraced by our creator.

As is evidenced by Jonah's experience: the deliverers of the news don't set the outcome, God sets the outcome and repentance reaps not judgement by God, but forgiveness, mercy, grace, a welcome to those who turn from their own wills, from living their lives on their own terms and turn toward lives of righteousness prompted by God's persistent desire to be in relationship with its very creation. As one scholar notes: "Throughout, [all we know about God] ...God persists in requiring and rewarding righteousness."²

God provides a call to action that is imminent, 40 day until destruction is upon the entire city of 120,000, or a calling from Jesus that results in immediate response by those who would become his disciples. God's call to repentance is imminent, there is a sense of urgency about the time frame for response. It is in some ways relentless. This stands in stark contrast to the relaxed approach many of us take toward our relationship with God and God's creation. If we are only in this act of religious devotion and faith for our individual outcomes then there would be no sense of urgency, there would be no commitment to anything beyond acting on behalf of our own outcome.

² Price, Joseph L., Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, 268.

Debie Thomas asks us this: “Do we believe any of this? I mean, really, deep in our hearts, when push comes to shove, do we believe that our faith makes urgent, time-sensitive claims on us? Or are we offended at the thought that our spiritual casualness has real-world consequences?”³

Our response to God and our response to one another matters. Our response to the call of God informs our response to those we encounter. Our response to the invitation of repentance informs how we posture ourselves in relationship to God. It’s cyclical, because no matter how we like to see ourselves, we are time and time again in each of these roles, the insider and outsider, the called and the repentant. As whole, complete humans created with free will and striving for relationship with God we are all of it. And, the time for us to respond is now. We are called to act now, not when it’s convenient for us, not when we have repented and feel as though God has absolved us of our self-centered living. It is all before us now.

This past Monday as we celebrated the legacy and call to repentance from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I quoted his call to the good people, the people of faith who don’t see the urgency in that faith. Hear his words again: “It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people who sit around and say,

³ Thomas, Debie. Journey with Jesus. www.journeywithjesus.net.

"Wait on time." Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And, so, we must help time and the time has come for good people to stand up."⁴

We are called to do and be more than passive participants of religious institutions. We are called to respond to God, to be the co-workers of God, and most days that involves some form of repentance, too. As we think back on the people in today's readings we see that they are in motion, they are acting, responding, to God and to Jesus, with urgency. Why should we be any different?

⁴ <https://www.monmouth.edu/about/wp-content/uploads/sites/128/2019/01/MLKJrSpeechatMonmouth.pdf>