

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – 21 January 2018  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Whenever I read this particular text from Jonah, I have to chuckle because it really does make Jonah's work, and his attitude, sound remarkably straightforward. Jonah is to go to Ninevah, proclaim that judgment is coming and warn people that if they don't shape up, they will be shipped out, in a manner of speaking. And it works! They believed Jonah, they turned to God, they proclaimed a fast, they repented ... And God changed His mind and saved the entire nation from destruction! This is fantastic news, isn't it? News that bodes well for our world today – if we listen to God's voice, believe in Him and change our ways, we too can be saved! What could be better than that?

However, what we don't hear in this part of Jonah's story is that he is just a sourpuss, a grump, an Oscar the Grouch, who gets ticked off at God for actually doing what He said He would do! Jonah spent all that time, hoofing his way across a godless country, telling them to believe in a God they would never really believe in – at least that's how Jonah thought – and then ... they did believe and Jonah was caught off-guard. He never really did believe that what God had asked him to do, or, rather, what God had *ordered* him to do, would be fruitful. Jonah really believed that what he was doing was a royal waste of time, but if he did what God asked, then at least *he* (Jonah) would look good before the Lord. Jonah really didn't understand that what *he* could see was just a tiny, wee part of the plan of salvation that God was unrolling all over the world, using Jonah and many, many others like him. Jonah could only see his small part and he was cynical about how much impact he could make on his own. What he didn't understand is that God called him *not to be the mechanism of salvation himself, but simply to be a cog in that mechanism*. Jonah had a very important part to play but his was by no means the most important part. He was just one of many who were working, often in obscurity, to bring about God's plan for salvation.

Last Sunday, the Archbishop spoke to all of us about "call". He shared with us about Samuel's call and how it required Eli to help him to hear and understand that call. The Archbishop wondered how many burning bushes Moses passed right by before he finally recognized that God was reaching out to him and calling him. He asked us to consider how many times and in what ways God has spoken to us like he spoke to Samuel, offering us chances to fulfill our vocation by answering His call, or how many times we have been asked to be like Eli as we help another recognize and discern the call God is making on their life ...

We, like Samuel, all have opportunities to answer a call as God invites us to do something that no one else but us can do. We, like Eli, can become the helper and interpreter who assists another as they discern their call. And then we all have that time in our lives when we find we might be more like Jonah – we have answered the call; we are doing exactly as God has asked; but we aren't really convinced it's going to do any good.

Sometimes, when I look around at the world and I observe the churches and the roles that the churches play these days, I wonder which role we have taken on. (And I am not speaking specifically about St. James, but rather about the church in the world in 2018.)

Are we Samuel, listening as God speaks to us and whispers in our ears that He has chosen us to do an important thing? Are we, the church, recognizing our call to become prophets in the world? Are we walking out into our homes, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our watering-holes and speaking with others about the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Or are we, as a church, playing the role of Eli, interpreting with others and helping them discern how God is speaking to them? Are we putting aside our fears and worries about anything and everything and reaching out to the Samuels of the world to give them the courage and the support they need so that they can truly understand and fulfill the role God has chosen for them?

Or has the church in the world become a lot more like Jonah, walking that long distance through the world, Ninevah, Nova Scotia, Halifax, wherever we find ourselves ... saying the right words – those words that the preacher tells us every Sunday that we have to say - but without the conviction of heart and soul that what we are saying, our message as the church, and as members of the church, which is the *body of Christ*, really has any meaning?

Jonah spoke the words. He did exactly, to the letter, what God commanded him to do, but his heart wasn't in it. He was so tired, and fed up and cynical, that he really didn't believe that his efforts and his hardships and all the potential scrapes and problems this message might get him into, were truly worth it in the end. He had been tasked to do a job but in his heart he didn't really think his job would contribute anything worthwhile and lasting ...

Sometimes it feels like the Christian Church, in the western world anyway, has fallen into this Jonah trap. We all know what it is we are supposed to do and what we are supposed to say. We have grown up listening to the Creeds and sharing in the Baptismal Promises, but somewhere along the line we stop proclaiming that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, and that through him we can be given the gifts of peace that passes all understanding, love and hope, healing and eternal life that starts right now. Sometimes it seems as though the church has gotten so used to assuming that nothing good can happen in Ninevah, that we either stop sharing that good news or we do so with a lackluster attitude because there's a part of us that doesn't really believe that others will believe. Why put ourselves out there, why potentially attract attention to ourselves when no one's going to care anyway? Let alone believe, repent and change their ways to follow God?

Why should we put ourselves out there for God? ... We should put ourselves out there for God because we never do know what might just happen *after* we have walked by proclaiming that Good News of Jesus Christ.

Jonah didn't want to trudge across Ninevah. He didn't want to proclaim God's word to those people who wouldn't listen anyway, but he did. Probably not with any

amount of charisma. And probably not with a tremendous sense of conviction, and yet ... God worked through Jonah anyway! The last verse of the passage we listened to said: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

Jonah may not have done a wholehearted, "believe it because I do" job of sharing God's word with the people of Ninevah, but God worked through what Jonah did anyway, to bring about peace and hope and joy and healing and eternal life. Jonah was not responsible for saving the people. That responsibility came down to the relationship the people fostered with God and God's response to their turning toward him. Jonah didn't save them. God did. Jonah just did as God commanded and God did the rest.

If you read further into Jonah, you will discover that Jonah was quite grumpy with God for saving those nasty people. Jonah's attitude was horrible. However, God worked through him nonetheless. God can do amazing things where we least expect them.

You and I, and every person who calls him or herself Christian, has been given the call to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world. And whether you realize it or not, just by coming into this church today, you really are a witness to that Good News in the world. Even if you try hard not to be!

The question is not whether we *will* witness but rather *how* we will witness. Will we go out into the world like Jonah, grumbling all the way, assuming that no one will listen to us anyway, so what's the point? Or will we go out as willing witnesses, doing our best, putting our faith in God before us and trusting that God does not expect *us* to do the saving? He just expects us to share the Good News and leave the rest to him.

One of the ways that we are encouraged to participate in sharing this Good News is to gather with others who are just like us, many who think they can't possibly share anything, others who are even skeptical that this is what we are called to do at all as the church. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and with many Samuels and Elis, the Archbishop has created a wonderful venue through which we, as the church in Nova Scotia, can learn together what we are called to do and how we might go about it. I really do recommend that each and every one of you join me next Saturday at the MORE Mission School. This is an opportunity to learn how to become a Samuel or how to become an *enthusiastic, believing and trusting* Jonah.

If we truly believe that this church community is one that can grow and thrive under God's guidance, then this is the journey we must take, and it must be taken together.

We can continue as Jonah grumbling and "doing as he was told" and being taken aback by the reception he received, or we can become a new kind of Jonah – one who really believes in and anticipates that God will indeed do a new thing in the world and in the church – in our church!