

Three Preachers Walk In

Lou Ann Norsetter

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

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Our readings today feature three preachers. And what a group they are! Jonah cruises the Mediterranean with the help of a friendly, yet large, fish. John the Baptist moves among his followers sporting the latest chic trends: camel hair shirts while eating high-protein bugs with a honey ganache. Finally, Jesus succinctly greets passersby with a short homily: “Repent for the kingdom is at hand. Believe the Good News.”

While all three deliver messages from God, they bring us stories of hope and caution at the same time. While I tell their stories, listen for parts that ring true for you. It’s my guess, we all have parts of Jonah, John and Jesus within us – both their best sides and perhaps when they fall short.

I’d like to start with the Jonah passage I just read. The story begins with Jonah’s second call, but I want to back up to the part about the fish. We’re so used to hearing Jonah and the Whale, but the Bible just uses the term “fish.” It’s one of the most popular children’s stories; songs, books and the first Veggie Tale movie brought us Jonah’s story. It offers us hope and reassurance that God stays with us through thick and thin -- maybe more than seaside rescues.

Jonah starts out with a call from God: “Go to the Ninevites and tell them to repent!” Seems like a simple enough message to relay. Jonah gets right on it. He plans his route to Nineveh, an 11-day hike northeast into the mountains (per Google Maps), to what would become modern day Mosul, Iraq. Early on he arrives in Joppa, modern day Tel Aviv, a coastal city in Israel. He immediately books passage on a boat headed for Tarshish – a Spanish city near the Straits of Gibraltar. Jonah could not get any further away. Remember, everyone knew the earth was flat, then. He’d simply fall off the end of the earth.

It’s no wonder Jonah takes a hard left detour. The Assyrians had no need for Judeans, the northern citizens of Israel. They had attacked the country, killing as many Judeans as possible. They made regular raids into the area, paying their mercenaries by body count. God wanted Jonah to preach directly to them in their own city! Sailing away seemed like a pretty good option.

But God wanted the message delivered. A storm threatens the boat; all the sailors begin to pray, vow to repent, think of sacrifices that may appease the gods and calm the winds. But not Jonah. He found a cozy spot in the hold, napping through it all. The captain found him, ordering him back on deck to pray for calm. But Jonah realizes the Lord brought the storm for him.

The sailors sacrifice Jonah. Over the side he goes, the seas instantly settle. Yet God still wants Jonah to preach. In comes a friendly fish, providing God’s mercy to Jonah. Spoiler alert: use your imagination for the next part. Jonah, riding in the fish, thanks God for his rescue and mercy. The fish delivers Jonah to shore with an unceremonious burp.

As we heard earlier, God calls to Jonah a second time. The trip is still on to Nineveh. This time God even writes the sermon: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Jonah finally complies; he addresses the Assyrians with the short message. Unexpectedly, the Ninevites respond immediately.

They display signs of repentance: sack cloth for people and animals alike; they fast; they sit on piles of ash; they pray to God.

God delights in their worshipping and turn from violence. They heard the message; destruction is no longer warranted. Everyone is happy – except Jonah.

Jonah's anger takes over. He stews outside the city because the destruction he preached did not happen. In fact, Jonah denies them any mercy after destroying Judea. How could God have let them get away with it? God sees Jonah's dismay and temporarily provides some relief in the form of a shade tree. Yet one day later, God sends a worm to devour the tree, leaving Jonah sweltering under a desert sun. God then asks what Jonah did to grow the tree? And who called the worm? How can Jonah (and all of us here) parcel out God's mercy? Is God's mercy not for all, not just "our people?"

Far beyond the whale or fish, this short story shows us the extent of God's love and mercy for all people. Whether we run from God or not, God remains with us. And continues to stay with us, however long it takes.

Repentance is a tricky concept. Often, it conjures an image of an old man, sandal-shod, in tattered robes, carrying a sign "Repent for the end is near." We bristle at those words as flip, outmoded, drawing us into endless guilt for our contemporary lives. How could these three preachers possibly exhort us to repent thousands of years later?

"Turn or burn" connotes a philosophy that gives short shrift to the idea of repentance. We now look upon repentance as a turning back to God. I bet most of us feel we've never left God, so the idea of repentance may seem unnecessary. But it also suggests we learn more about God's ways – learning more about the ways of the world and how we may usher in God's mercy to all. God invites us to repent simply to draw closer to us; enriching life for all. Certainly, your presence here – physically or online – demonstrates repentance in action.

Along with that invitation, not admonition, is simply believing the Good News. Neither God nor Jesus delight in threats of doom. We have certainly read passages of angry rebukes from God and Jesus. But they are followed by mercy. Consider the golden calf story. Moses talked God out of his intent to start over with a new crop of humans. Instead, Moses reminds God of the original covenant. Other stories demonstrate God's mercy over perceived fairness. When the prodigal son returns, the older brother refuses to join in celebration. How could this be fair to him? A similar question arises when all workers in the vineyard receive the same pay regardless of hours worked.

These stories challenge us to reconsider our own values. Does God's mercy count more than fairness? How do we balance justice with loving our enemies? What if our attempts for justice go nowhere? Do we just give up? We may recall that God stayed with Jonah for two preaching engagements. The first did not go well, but a friendly fish showed mercy to a begrudging Jonah. It worked – mercy delivered even if Jonah saw it as failure. We will constantly finesse our understanding and bearing witness as we draw closer to God – repentance.

The Mark passage read earlier describes ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. John remains distant as we hear of his arrest. While John's story lasts for but a sentence, it speaks volumes of preaching. John preached as others had before him: Moses, Elijah, Jonah, all the prophets. The same message

repeats right up to Jesus' baptism: Repent and believe the Good News. In fact, we may infer that John passes the mantel to Jesus who repeats the refrain.

His arrest also signals the costs of preaching. None of us know what is in store when we hear God's words. In John's case, it meant calling others, repeating the Good News and his death. Jesus picks up where John left off: preaching and understanding the consequences of sharing God's message.

Almost in the same breath, Jesus seeks help from others. Mark reports that Jesus calls four disciples: Andrew, Peter, James and John. We don't know whether these four men had any prior knowledge of Jesus, but they respond immediately. Nor do we know if Jesus knew them either. Jesus had no time to advertise. He didn't complete any background checks; no one knew if the new team would work well together. He simply approached several individuals, extending a personal invitation to follow him. He claims they will become fishers of men, whatever that means. At least Jonah had marching orders and a short speech to make. These four disciples have no idea what they're supposed to do.

Yet, they respond immediately, without question. This short passage helps us understand our role as disciples. As Jesus extends a personal invitation, so have we been asked. It may be to bring a dish to pass at the annual meeting. Perhaps an usher fell ill, and we need a fourth person to assist. An empty time slot exists on the Christmas Tree sales lot schedule. Someone may call to ask for help with Faith Formation or serve on Common Ministry.

All of these and more are discipleship opportunities. We cannot commit to every request but we use our talents to serve when we can. Depending on the request, our answers may require time and prayer before we answer. We may serve in an effort that we don't fully understand or seems out of character. Such is the nature of a call.

Our calls are not limited to religious activities. Many of us are called to teaching, farming, accounting, yoga instruction, politics. In Biblical times, no writers could imagine calls to women – how scandalous in their society. We know many women responded to their calls – immediately and wholeheartedly. Some names came to mind: Puah and Shiphrah, the midwives of Moses, Naomi and Ruth, Mary – Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla and Phoebe (partners with Apostle Paul). Everyone here has responded at one time or another.

As with Andrew, Peter, James and John, we cannot predict how this will turn out. It may be a "one and done." We may serve in many disciple opportunities until our dying day. It may be fun to serve with others; we may find ourselves scared out of our wits, praying for survival as did the sailors on Jonah's passage.

In all cases, whether we know it or not, we're guiding God's mercy to the benefit of ourselves and others. The immediacy of our response has more to do with getting to know God and Christ. God seeks to draw us near; yet our own time on earth is limited. The more we respond, the stronger our relationship with God.

Is any of this easy? Just ask Jonah. He struggled from the moment he heard God's call. I can think of several personal Jonah moments in my lifetime. But I will share an innocent response that had greater impact than I could have imagined.

Years ago, I made repeated trips to Haiti. Green Bay has a group called Friends of Haiti, a medical mission originally started through St. Phillips Catholic Church. I have no medical background, but my daughter was just thinking about nursing at the time. She had made several trips – I tagged along on a few of them.

I did various activities as needs arose: collected patient records, weighed the patients, attended to drinking water purification. On one trip, I had quickly grabbed an emergency sewing kit while packing – needles, thread and scissors. A cheap little kit from a drug store shelf. Little did I know that would become indispensable during the mission.

A group of patients came to clinic after an accident. Many had burns requiring care. While they removed clothing for wound care, I noticed many items had ripped seams and holes. While others attended their wounds, I pulled out my sewing kit and began repairs.

Days later, other uses came for my sewing kit. While I repaired clothing for all sorts of people, the Haitian translators asked for my needles while fitting used glasses. I think they needed a focal point for periphery testing. We shared my three needles for the entire week. I sewed; they fitted patients with glasses. A \$2 last-minute purchase answered God's call!

Three preachers walk into our lives. One delivers God's mercy in spite of himself. Another speaks truth to power and pays dearly. Jesus asks us personally to join in discipleship. May we say yes to all three. Amen.

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