

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday of Epiphany: January 21, 2024

The Saint of Second Chances

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this Third Sunday of Epiphany. As we continue our season, our readings today talk again of callings. This time of Jonah by God, and the disciples by Jesus. But let's dive in a little deeper into our good friend Jonah.

For any of you that are familiar with the Bible stories shared to children, Jonah and the Whale are among the favorites. But today's passages have no whales or large fish. This is the second time Jonah is called by God, and although not the most enthusiastic messenger of God, Jonah does go to deliver the message. He has learned his lesson and foregoes the travails of not listening to God. Therefore today, Jonah is the saint of second chances.

Nineveh, was located in Assyria on the Tigris River—approximately 500 miles northeast of Israel. "From the time of the resurgence of the Assyrian Empire in 745 BCE until the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE, Nineveh was the symbol of overwhelming and ruthless power." As noted in today's reading there is no water route from Israel to Assyria, so now Jonah would have to travel overland—a journey that would take about one month.

Jonah's sermon to Nineveh is short—eight words in the NRSV translation of the Bible, but only five words in the original Hebrew. Did he expand on that theme at all? We have no way of knowing. In his short sermon, there is no call to repentance. Jonah offers

no ray of hope. He simply announces that the city will be overthrown. As sermons go, it is hardly persuasive.

But Praise God! This is every preacher and prophet's dream come true! Jonah preached his little sermonette, and the whole city repented: "from their greatest even to their least." Amazing! Such a result can be attributed only to the work of the Holy Spirit—evidence of the grace of God. Jonah certainly can't claim any credit as a great preacher.

What our lectionary does not cover is the details of the story. It reads:

The news reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. He made a proclamation and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,

*"Let neither man nor animal, herd nor flock, taste anything;
let them not feed, nor drink water;
but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and animal,
and let them cry mightily to God.
Yes, let them turn everyone from his evil way,
and from the violence that is in his hands.*

*Who knows whether God will not turn and relent,
and turn away from his fierce anger,
so that we might not perish?"*

These people were serious about where they stood in the eyes of God, and they certainly wanted a second chance. The amazing thing is that the king hears and repents along with the general people. It isn't easy to persuade high-ranking officials to repent, because their position and power tends to make them arrogant. Normally one in power would be reluctant to make a public display of their repentance, lest they appear weak.

But this king goes the whole route. He removes his royal robe, dresses in sackcloth, and sits in ashes, another sign of penitence. He issues a royal decree requiring everyone—people and livestock alike—to fast and to “cry mightily to God.” He explains the purpose that maybe God will relent. Maybe God will change his mind. Maybe God will turn from his fierce anger. Maybe God will spare them.

The king’s great hope is realized. God does relent. He does change his mind. He does turn from his fierce anger. He does decide to spare these Ninevites. As someone once put it, “The king repented, so God relented.” The people turned from their evil ways, so God turned from the evil that he was planning to impose on them.

We shouldn’t be surprised at this outcome. God would not have insisted that Jonah go to Nineveh if God hadn’t wanted to spare the Ninevites the destruction that he was considering in the first place. This story has been front-loaded with grace from the very first verse.

The irony is that Jonah’s story parallels that of the Ninevites. He disobeyed God, and found himself on the verge of disaster. However, God gave him a second chance. When he obeyed God by going to Nineveh and preaching the sermon that God gave him, he not only helped to save their lives, he helped to save his own life.

This leads us to the calling of the disciples by Jesus. As each is called, they willingly leave their positions and follow into a life where Jesus will become their main focus. These disciples will falter and bear false witness. They will fight over position; they will question morals and money; they will betray and deny Jesus, with many second chances. Yet in the end, they will spread the Gospel of Jesus faithfully until their own deaths.

Jesus again will teach us that God is merciful; he is a God that offers second chances. And ultimately Jesus will offer himself to show us the guarantee that God forgives us.

If you love the Old Testament stories, know that you will find Jesus there. If you love the New Testament and Gospels, you will find the Hebrew scriptures there. It is the same merciful God calling every generation to turn from things that are destructive to things that are morally right and life-giving.

We are on our pilgrimage of Epiphany - examining where God is calling us to go. We have many examples of those who have gone before. Where are we being called today? We can honestly ask the question of where God is calling us, and we can also move forward without fear of making a mistake.

We hold the lessons of God as taught through our scriptures; we hold a moral compass in our hearts and minds. We have been taught to love God, neighbor and self. We can look into the future without fear, knowing if we make a mistake, God will still be there. If we put an honest foot forward, the Spirit will lead us, even if we need a second chance.

Where is God calling us today? What in your life needs to be left behind? Repent and move forward. With every prayer of hope comes a second chance. Amen