

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Third Sunday after Epiphany: January 24, 2021

“The Stubborn Prophet”

Rev. Lois Williams

Good Morning everyone on this soon to be rainy day. It seems like last Wednesday we began another beginning in this country, as we do every four or eight years. Interestingly enough we are being called to unity and to respect the dignity of every human being, sounds familiar right? But we have gone through a lot in the last four years and continue to fight a pandemic.

It doesn't matter where you fall on the political scale if you are a Christian. If you are a disciple of Jesus and believe in God's mercy and goodness, how you express that is your own choice. But the concept of loving others, repenting for our shortcomings, and having hope in God's plan for the future is not a political stance, it is a Christian one. That is what I want to focus on today.

Has God ever called you to do something and you thought “maybe not”, or that all-too-famous, “maybe later”, to what you felt was an inconvenience? You may have felt called to do something that you know needs to be done, but then thought that someone else could do it. Or maybe you felt God calling you to do something and thought, “people won't like me if I do that,” or “that may put my reputation in the spotlight”.

Well, today we have Jonah's response and I have to admit, I have had this at times in my life as well. When God asks you to do something and you know the result and feel that God's choice is unfair. This seems to be the problem for Jonah in our

lesson today. It may also be a problem we face today as our country tries to move forward in peace.

This story of Jonah may or may not be true, but one thing about the Jewish tradition, every story teaches a life lesson, and Jonah has a lot to teach us about ourselves and about how God works in the world. When Jonah was originally asked to go to Nineveh, he ran the other way. Most of us know the story that Jonah went in the opposite direction from Nineveh, jumped in a boat, was then flung overboard, swallowed by a big fish, and then eventually did what God asked: which was to tell the town of Nineveh to repent.

Why was Jonah so stubborn you might ask? Or why was Jonah so opposed to do the job that God called him to do? This is where we get the lesson for today. Jonah it seems, did not want to warn the Ninevites to repent because he knew if he did, they would repent, and God would forgive them. That doesn't sound like a bad deal does it? And that is exactly what happened.

Jonah, on the other hand felt that the people of Nineveh needed to be disciplined. He knew of God's forgiveness and mercy and Jonah felt that for God it was just a step too far and if only Jonah did not warn the town, they would suffer what Jonah felt they deserved.

For me, this is a reminder that I do not know God's plan or reasons, and it is not for me to question God, especially when it comes to forgiveness and mercy. This story reminds me that I, too, sin and need repentance. And if I come to God and ask for mercy, it will be there. It reminds me not to judge others, lest I also be judged. Who, how, and why God judges, smites, or forgives, or who and where God shows His mercy is way above my pay grade.

When I was called to ordained ministry, I admit, I wasn't thrilled. The journey to be able to rightfully stand before you today took years of school, lots of money – some of which I still owe in the form of student loans, more time than I thought existed, and a will power to complete the task that at the time seemed herculean.

But the reward of God's mercy and goodness along the way, the people I met, the things I learned about myself, the concepts I conceived about God are priceless, even if the journey was a rough one. Interestingly enough, I have also learned that I have no idea how I impact people, and how far my presence can go, as the butterfly effect is beyond my understanding.

For those who are not familiar with the butterfly effect, this is when the flapping of a butterfly's wings in one place, through time and space can eventually cause a tsunami on the other side of the world. Or more technically, when one small change at just the right time can create an enormous change somewhere else.

Do you really think Jonah could even imagine what effect he had on the people of Nineveh who listened to his warning? They did repent and God again showed his mercy. Who knows what children were saved to go forward and preach the message of repentance and forgiveness to future generations. How many from Nineveh carried the story of God's forgiveness and mercy to other generations and other nations? We will never know.

When we consider Jesus calling the disciples, do you think they could even fathom that their sins, their foibles, and their faith would be on full display more than two thousand years later to a generation of people who would read their stories, not on scrolls of lamb skin, but off of a tablet, computer, or the internet?

When Jesus called those first disciples, and they said yes, do you think they knew what they were signing up for? I doubt it. Throughout the Gospels we see many times that they do not understand what Jesus is trying to explain to them. Many times they get the message wrong, or feel that the world should be one way, when in fact, it is in reality- another. Often times they would argue that Jesus' information on the kingdom of heaven was just the opposite of what they had been taught. But in the end, those same disciples became willing to give their lives for the very promises Jesus gave them.

Today I ask you, what is God calling you to do? Are you in need of some good life review and repentance? Because if that is the case, God's forgiveness and mercy is there for you, even if you or others don't feel you deserve it. Similar to the story of Jonah.

Or, are you called to do something that puts you a bit out of your comfort zone, and maybe is even more work that you are ready to do? God's strength will help you, just as he did for the new disciples of Jesus.

The one thing today's scripture is clearly telling us, is to say yes to God and his callings for His purpose in our lives, but to also leave the work of God, to God. Whether we approve of God's decisions or not, it is not for us to judge. Don't become the stubborn prophet like Jonah, but instead respond as the first disciples did when Jesus called them. Drop whatever you are doing, and follow Jesus into a life of constant repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and, most of all, love. Amen