

Epiphany 3B, St John's Olney, 21 January 2018

The Reverend Henry P. McQueen

Jonah 3:1-5,10; Ps 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

S.D.G.

Jambo!

In Swahili that is a welcome, and your response would be si jambo. We celebrate African Palms today, we celebrate one of God's ministries. The history of African Palms is one that should not be lost, it should be remembered and celebrated. I am not here to share that story, there are board members here who would be delighted to share it with you, I am here to preach God's word; and I do that best when I get out of the way, so lets start with the reading from the Hebrew Bible and the story of Jonah.

Jonah is a story that delights children and perhaps puzzles adults who are stuck with being logical. Most of you know that I had the opportunity to study the Hebrew Bible with a rabbi, and we studied midrash. One of the questions that we explored was whether midrash was still being created today, and the answer is yes. This next story, a great explanation of Jonah, is an example of contemporary midrash.

Many of you will remember the TV show *Northern Exposure*, for those who don't this story is just as relevant, you will just miss a deeper knowledge of the characters involved.

Joel, a young doctor who finds himself stuck in Alaska while he figures out who he is, is fishing on a lake one night and suddenly imagines his rabbi from home in New York is with him. They are inside a great fish. This is what happens when you daydream while fishing.

Rabbi Schulman     We're inside, Joel.

Joel                     Inside what?

Rabbi Schulman     The fish... the belly of the beast... You know, Jonah may be the key here.

Joel                     Key to what?

- Rabbi Schulman     The meaning of all this. Think a minute, Joel. Why was Jonah swallowed in the first place? God told him to go to Nineveh, cry out against their wickedness. Instead, Jonah flees, hops a boat to Tarshish. God raises a ruckus, Jonah gets the heave ho. What's the message, Joel?
- Joel                     Next time to go Nineveh.
- Rabbi Schulman     Responsibility. Jonah was trying to avoid his responsibility.

So for all who wondered, there is the message of Jonah (or at least one of the messages). What is our responsibility and are we going to avoid it by going to Tarshish, or are we going to jump in and do something about it.

As Christians, Jesus tells us to love God and love our neighbor; the many examples of this in scripture often come to us in the form of hospitality. Abraham showed hospitality to strangers and in doing so entertained angels, some say entertained God. Jesus showed hospitality to all manner of people. Perhaps the first time I witnessed true hospitality and love of neighbor was when I studied in Canterbury. The program involved about three dozen seminarians or newly ordained clergy; there were representatives from all around the world, the majority were from a large selection of African nations. As we greeted each other the first day I was struck with how warmly those from Africa greeted each other. Introductions typically included name and country, those from Africa then hugged and exclaimed "welcome my brother from the west" or the north, south, or east. This would be like us saying "welcome my brother from Virginia", "welcome my sister from Delaware"; but as odd as that may be we forget that in Christ's world that is the case.

We are all sisters and brothers. Jesus preached "repent, and believe in the good news." While we may immediately think that to repent is to confess our sins (and it is), it really is about changing our habits, changing our ways; we are to turn around and do the right thing. We are to turn away from labeling people with anything other than sister and brother. We are to turn away from labels of whole countries that imply them to be backwater sewage and know that the people living there are our sisters and brothers and that their land is part of God's own creation. We are to welcome our neighbor, near

and far, and embrace their homeland as part of the kingdom. That is our responsibility. We can try to go to Tarshish, but that is still our responsibility.

Permit me to share with you one story of how we witnessed this being lived out during our visit to Tanzania. One evening we learned that dinner that night would be hosted by the Sisters of Saint Mary's, but that did not prepare us for the evening we would experience.

As we drove up to the convent we were greeted with 10 singing nuns; they were singing a traditional greeting song and waving flowers. The flowers were gifts to us, as was the song. Never before have I been so warmly welcomed, it still brings me joy to think of it. We then shared tea with the Mother Superior and her predecessor. We learned about the ministries that the sisters offer throughout the country and toured their property. We saw plans for a preschool. We toured their extensive gardens, complete with chickens, pigs, cows, and goats. The local villagers are hired to tend the crops and animals; and on Friday any additional harvest, that is not needed by the community of Saint Mary's, is distributed to the village. We saw a small boarding school for girls, and a home for the priest who celebrates Eucharist for the sisters.

All of this was followed by dinner with the sisters. This simple community provided us with a four course feast from the plants and animals that are part of their farm. We were strangers in a strange land, and to this day I am overwhelmed by the hospitality that was offered, not only to us, but also to their neighbors.

It was an evening to remember. But then it got even better. Later in the week we were about a 30-45 minute drive from Masasi when we stopped at a road side market to get supplies for our lunch; walking towards us were two of the sisters who were in that village as part of their ministry, they were there without car or bicycle. Then as we left Masasi for Dar es Salaam, a four hour drive and 90 minute flight, we again ran into the sisters at an orphanage. In a country where we may question the roads and transportation system the sisters seem to get around just fine. They have accepted their responsibility.

There are times, as we spoke last week, that God calls to us in a still small voice. And there are times that God sends us a sign instead. Such a sign begins our Gospel

reading this week: “after John was arrested”. For Jesus that was a sign and he went to Galilee proclaiming the good news and building his band of followers, the apostles.

For us, people who can be far too logical, recognizing a sign from God can be a challenge, even when it is right in front of us. Looking back over this past year we had the sorrow of saying goodbye to Pat, the long time manager of African Palms, as well as Audrey and Bart, both strong supporters of that ministry. Several of us had the immense joy of being welcomed to Tanzania and Masasi as if we were long lost sisters and brothers. We had our eyes opened by the villagers who walked as much as 10 kilometers to draw water for the day. We had our hearts warmed by the greetings of our brothers and sisters in Tanzania. If you want a sign, just look back at this past year.

We have witnessed the joy and possibilities that is part of this ministry, and we have seen the void left by three committed individuals. I remember saying at Audrey’s funeral that we will need a whole lot of people to fulfill the void she has left in this ministry. This seems like the time to answer the call and accept the responsibility.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John accepted their responsibility; they answered the call and followed Jesus. Jesus took me to Tanzania where I fell in love with the country and the people, I pray that you do too.

Amen,