

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

Let's look at the Old Testament story of Jonah today, the background of today's reading. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah did not want to go there... not only did he not want to go to Nineveh, he went out of his way to keep from going there.

Now, when Jesus called his disciples Simon and Andrew, James and John they dropped everything, and followed Jesus. What is the difference between the two situations?

Jesus most likely was not a perfect stranger to these four men, they, in all likelihood had heard of him, if they hadn't already met him. They recognized Jesus as someone special, someone whom they needed to learn from, and to do so they knew they must stay near to him. There was no animosity between the disciples and Jesus as there was between Jonah and Nineveh.

Jonah was a man from Galilee who God chose to be a prophet to Nineveh centuries before the birth of Jesus. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire whose army destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. They were a true enemy of God's people. But not of God. That's where Jonah comes into the picture. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent or they would be destroyed.

I think that if a person walked around Washington D.C. shouting that if America didn't repent and change their ways, they would be destroyed, the person would either be laughed at or totally ignored. But that wasn't why Jonah didn't want to go to prophesy to Nineveh; he didn't want to go there because he knew God would have the final say, and he didn't want Nineveh to be saved. Nineveh had decimated some of God's people, Jonah didn't feel as though he could have a part in saving them. So he headed in the other direction and got on a cargo boat going even farther away.

When major problems, including a terrible storm, began to occur, the captain was looking for the cause. Jonah had an underlying feeling that he was the cause because he was disobeying God. He encouraged the sailors to throw him off the ship, not knowing if he would survive. As the story goes, he was swallowed by a whale where he survived for three days. Some people may scoff scoff, but through some miraculous process Jonah survived for three days in the ocean before he was spit out upon the shores of Nineveh. God showed mercy to Jonah in not letting him drown even though he had disobeyed God.

After going through all that Jonah decided he had better obey God, and what we heard today was the result. Jonah took a three day excursion across the city and believe it or not the people repented. Why? Because God was working in Nineveh before he called Jonah. God knew the people would repent, he just needed a messenger, and Jonah was the man for the job. God wanted to show his love and mercy even to the enemies of his people, and because they repented and turned to God, God forgave them and showed them mercy. In doing this God gave a message to Jonah as well, that message being that God loves everyone.

However there is a very similar message in the Old Testament lesson and the gospel lesson. Jonah called the people to repentance and Jesus called the people to repentance. Evidently repentance is important to God. Throughout the Old Testament God would make covenants with his chosen people and they would continually ignore what God had required of them. Yet God never abandoned his people. He would send a prophet who would call them to repentance, they would change their evil ways and God forgave them. We are now included as

God's people because of the acts of Jesus. Repentance is just as important today as it was in the days of old when prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Jonah, walked the earth.

As the people of Israel, they had the laws of Moses and knew of the covenant between God and Israel. They surely knew already that God wanted them to "hate evil and love good" (Amos 5:15), to avoid what is wrong, and embrace what is right and to pursue righteousness and flee wickedness. So why weren't they doing it?

We could, in fact, ask the same question about ourselves. When we consciously do something wrong, usually it's not because we don't know any better. Rather, there seems to be a spiritual duality in us that's always in conflict. The apostle Paul calls it the old nature and the new nature. It reminds me of the cartoon where the angel is on one shoulder and the devil is on the other. And if you think that's too silly an image, listen to these words of the apostle Paul from Romans 7: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:14-15). Paul was aware of an inner conflict — a struggle in which he was pulled in opposite directions.

Part of the problem is that often when we deliberately do the wrong thing and nothing bad happens to us, it becomes easier the next time to do it again. Writing in *Psychology Today* about this phenomenon, Jennifer Baker, a professor at the College of Charleston, says that as we deliberately do wrong, we hurt ourselves. Basically her message is this: We come up with our own rules for our behavior (as a way to understand what we are doing). We make up our own rules. In doing this we lower our standards; we decide that we're flawed and that's okay; and we rationalize or make up excuses for our behavior. And this does not please God!

In order to stand in the presence of the Lord we need to live a life of obedience. God wants us to follow his commandments, the 10 that were given to Moses on the mountain, but also the ones Jesus gave to us, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. When we realize we have failed to do so we can repent, change our ways, forgetting the rules that we have written, and turn back to God, or as in the case of the Ninevites, to turn to God for the first time. Repentance is more than saying I'm sorry, it is changing our behavior to be in line with what is right in God's expectation.

For those of us who identify as Christ followers, doing our best to do the right thing — the moral thing, the thing that is loving our neighbor as ourselves — and repenting when we realize we aren't, is what keeps us in a close relationship with God.

Before God sent Jonah to the Ninevites they probably had no desire to be in a relationship with God. But God wanted to be in a relationship with them. God, the Holy Spirit, went before Jonah and gave the people of Nineveh insight to see that repentance was the right thing for them to receive God's mercy. Jesus came, called people to repentance, to find the good news. His disciples who followed the call learned the good news that with repentance comes forgiveness, and in Jesus there is everlasting life. We his disciples hear the same message, repent and hear the good news.

All glory be to God.