

Epiphany 3-January 21, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

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

"And They Believed" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

In this third Sunday of Epiphany, we are reminded that throughout all of scripture, the Lord has used unusual people that have been called to proclaim his word of forgiveness.

In two of today's readings, we learn about the similarities and the contrasts between the calling of Jonah by the Lord and the calling of Simon and Andrew by Jesus as he walked along the sea of Galilee. Prior to these people receiving their divine call, in both cases something is cast into the sea. In the first story, even though this part of the story of Jonah isn't included in the reading that we were given today, we remember from our Sunday School days that it was Jonah who was the one that was about to be called and who was thrown into the sea. Jonah told the sailors that were awakened by the violent storm that he was the cause of the storm and to prevent them from perishing, they should pick him up and toss him overboard. And they did, the sea stopped its raging and the sailors who once believed in other gods, now all believed in the one and only God who calmed the sea. But the Lord had not forgotten Jonah. Jonah was not going to be off the hook (pardon the pun), because the Lord had given him a job to do. Instead, the Lord sent a large fish to swallow him up before he perished in the sea. After swishing around in the guts of the fish for three days, Jonah decided to pray from the fish and asked to be delivered from the very literal mess he was in. The Lord then preached to the fish and told him to spew him out and the fish swam to the edge of the shore and spit him out.

This is where our reading for today begins. We are now told that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. You might think that now after being tossed into the sea and then spit out of a whale, Jonah would have been ready and willing to do what the Lord told him to do in the first place. Jonah did what he was first told to do, but to say that he was happy to do it still was not the case. Jonah was to preach a word of repentance to a very large, very wicked city. We don't really know, since scripture doesn't say, if Jonah repeated the same words over and over or if he preached this 8-word sermon "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown just once but we are told that after he only walked a third of the way into the city, this message spread to everyone, and it was believed by everyone. Jonah didn't even tell these people what they had to do within 40 days. The people of Nineveh didn't need a lecture on what is right and what is wrong. They knew what they were doing was wrong and noticed, after Jonah said these 8 words, the people didn't say they believed Jonah. They believed God. It was the word of the Lord that did what it was sent out to do...despite Jonah's reluctance to preach it. The story of how the wicked city of Nineveh turned from their evil ways does not end there. Repentance is not the end of your turning from your sins either. It ends in forgiveness. It ends when the Lord changes his mind about what you deserve to receive.

The story of the calling of Simon and Andrew does not begin with them being tossed into the sea. They are tossing nets into the sea to catch fish. They are doing the jobs that they likely planned on doing for the rest of their lives. In this case, it is the few words that Jesus says that changes the lives of Simon and Andrew. Jesus

simply says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Simon and Andrew could not have even had a clue what those words fishing for people even meant. I don't think they thought Jesus was starting a recruiting agency and wanted them to get in on the ground floor of this new business deal. But they didn't question the call and Jesus didn't question who he was calling. Jesus called and they followed. We learn next that two more followers are called. As soon as Jesus called out to James and John who were in the boat with their father, they immediately canceled their careers as fishermen and like Simon and Andrew became fishers for men.

These four fishermen that Jesus called sounded more eager to follow him than the obvious reluctance of Jonah. But in none of these cases, nor in any case in scripture is anyone just waiting for the Lord to show up and then begs the Lord to do what he calls them to do. No one's call begins with a good feeling in their gut and goes looking for the Lord to apply for the vocation of spreading God's word of forgiveness. We all are reluctant as we forgive those who sin against us. Every call in scripture and yes yours too, begins with hearing a word from outside yourselves. It always comes from the Word of the Lord and into your ears. That is why the Lord continues to assemble hosts of preachers to go into the world to speak his word of forgiveness.

When Jonah began his walk into the city of Nineveh and told the city to repent, we are told that everyone in the city believed this word of the Lord and the Lord changed his mind about what he planned to do to everyone. When we began this service today, you, like the people of Nineveh, repented of your sins in the Confession part of the Confession and Forgiveness. Guess how many of you the Lord has forgiven and has changed his mind about what you deserve. That's right. Every one of you. Amen