

3rd Sunday after Epiphany 2009

L. Hlass

Jonah 3:1-5,10; Ps. 62:6-14; I Corinth.7:29-31; Mark 1:14-2 Good Shepherd, Berkeley

Give us grace, O God, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of your marvelous works. Amen.

When I read through the OT and gospel lessons for today, what struck me in both cases were the parts of the stories that were not included. We were hearing about Jonah after all, and we know that the story of Jonah is not complete without the whale (or the big fish, whichever the case may be). If we didn't know the "rest of the story," we might assume that Jonah simply heard God's instruction, went to Nineveh as God had commanded, prophesized that the city would be destroyed if the people didn't repent and change their way, which they did do, and everyone lived happily ever after. But, that's not quite how the story went.

The complete story is not nearly so simple and tidy; and it's much more exciting. Last week Tom talked about how much he loves mystical, magical stories of "the quest." Well, the story of which our OT lesson is a part is about as thrilling as they come. A paraphrased Bible done by the Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson, called "The Message," does a fine job of telling this story. Peterson reminds us in the introduction to Jonah that there is a playful aspect to the story, a kind of slapstick clumsiness about Jonah as he bumbles his way along, trying, but always unsuccessfully, to avoid God. And that while we are smiling or laughing at Jonah, it's easy to drop the guard with which we try to keep God at a comfortable distance, and before we know it we find ourselves caught smackdab in the middle of the action.

Please listen to the story with me. ("The Message:" Jonah 1-2; then the OT lesson: Jonah 3)

So, Jonah did obey God, but not without learning a huge lesson from the school of hard knocks; not without descending to the dark, murky depths. And even then, it took three days and nights before Jonah was finally able to surrender, to burst out of his own tight will, out of his own notions about what his life should or shouldn't be about; out of the constrictions his ego; and to offer himself to a Greater Good, to becoming a recipient and an instrument of God's forgiveness, grace and mercy.

Our Gospel lesson holds a similar hidden part of the story; at least, a part that we don't examine in this season of our lectionary. The past two weeks we've heard about Jesus calling his disciples. The Sunday before that we heard the story of Jesus' baptism: how the sky broke open and the Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus.

And so Jesus was baptized, had this great epiphany and divine anointing, and now he is beginning his mission journey and calling his disciples. But that's now quite the whole story. There are these two small verses in Mark's gospel between Jesus' baptism and calling his disciples, where we hear that the Spirit (the same Spirit that descended like a dove upon him) "immediately drove him out to the wilderness," and there, for 40 days, with wild beasts, in harsh conditions, he was tempted by Satan.

We hear more explicitly about Jesus' experience in the wilderness in the other gospels: that he was tempted numerous times; that he fasted and was famished; that ultimately he endured these trials and was comforted by angels. Jesus endured a trial by fire. He was tested over and over, his heart and soul tempered like red-hot iron in

intensely blazing flames. Jesus was agonizingly strengthened and prepared for the quest ahead of him.

Have you ever been through a trial by fire? I feel like I have. I came out of seminary two and a half years ago bright eyed and bushy tailed, with what I can say now were delusions of grandeur about just how God was going to use me to bring salvation to the world (or at least to our little neck of the woods). Looking back I can see that both my expectations and naiveté were as high as my lofty spirit was above solid ground.

I feel as if I've been batted back down to earth with a 2x12 plank and then kicked a few times for good measure. Now that I'm able to stand up, and the stars in my head clear, I walk, albeit slowly, with the realization that God will use me as God will use me; that in some manner all will be well; and that I'm probably much more grounded and prepared for what's ahead in my quest.

I found great humor in the part of the Jonah story (probably because I can so identify with it) where Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He says, "It's all my fault. I'm the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and the storm will cease." Although in this story Jonah was right – the storm did cease, we don't usually have nearly that much power over the elements, and that kind of thinking often indicates an over-active ego just ripe enough for a big ole humbling experience.

In some ways, it seems that our country and even the world, has been through a "trial by fire." And that this is one of those special rare moments in history in which our nation has the opportunity, like the Ninevites did, to turn back from "evil and the from the violent ways that stain our hands;" to turn around and face God; accept God's grace, mercy and forgiveness; and to truly be used as an instrument of Great Goodness in the world. We are in that moment of opportunity.

And I think it's not about God changing God's mind about us, but about our changing our minds and our ways; about us repenting, turning around and facing God who has always been there loving us. Like you and me, Jonah and Jesus were on a quest – one running away from God, one toward God. Either way, the journey ahead is bound to contain trials, suffering and hardship – it's part of the human experience. And these trials can be used to strengthen and guide us, or they can lead to stagnation, even paralysis and death.

Last Sunday Tom described the roving teacher at the crossroads who points to the road that is broad, easy, and lined with beautiful flowers. The teacher smiles and says, "but you don't really want to go that way do you? Honestly, it's nice but it's dull." Winking, the teacher gestures to a thicket and pulls back a branch. You can just make out the dimmest trace of a path. "Come with me," says the teacher, "the path is a bit steep and rocky but wait till you see the view."

Wait 'til you see the view! Amen.