

**3 Epiphany
January 24, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In our first reading this morning the Lord came to Jonah with an invitation, and “Jonah set out and went to Nineveh” in obedience to God’s invitation. Then, in our gospel reading this morning, we heard the story of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James and John to be his disciples. The text says that they accepted his bidding “immediately” ... even in the case of James and John who left their father in the boat with their hired help. For Simon, Andrew, James, and John there was no hesitation ... no consideration of other options ... no analysis of the cost and promise. They followed Jesus “immediately.”

Now, one might think ... especially with the juxtaposition of these lessons ... that when God or Jesus makes the invitation one is ... or at least, should be ... obedient and therefore would accept the invitation immediately. But, what if one hesitates? What if one is not so sure? What if one is frightened and anxious?

Well, let’s hear the story of Jonah. This is one of my favorite Bible stories because I know it is true ... even if it never happened.

The Book of Jonah is only four short chapters long. In my bible, without the footnotes, it is printed on just two-and-a-half pages. There are books in the Bible that are shorter, but not with a story like this.

The portion of the Book of Jonah that we heard this morning begins with “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time ...” and then the Lord instructs Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to them about their evil ways. Jonah immediately obeyed the order; the people of Nineveh listen to Jonah and they repent; and the mind of the Lord is changed and the Ninevites are not destroyed. However, this is only part of the story.

The Book of Jonah is like a two act play with an epilog. In Act One Jonah is called to preach repentance to the Ninevites, but he chooses to run away. He gets into trouble and is rescued. In Act Two of the Book of Jonah, he is again called to preach to the Ninevites, only this time he obeyed, and they repent, and God relented on his threat to destroy them. Then there is an epilog ... is Jonah angry with God for not following through with his threat to annihilate the Ninevites ... it makes Jonah look like a fool ... as if he didn’t know what he was talking about when he preached to the Ninevites. But, then God assures Jonah that if God can redeem Jonah, why should Jonah be angry that God redeemed the people of Nineveh.

We all know that Jonah ended up in the belly of a big fish, or a whale, or a beast ... depending upon which translation of the Bible one reads. But do you remember how Jonah got there? The lesson this morning begins with, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time ..." So, the question is: When did the word of the Lord come to Jonah the first time?

The first time the Lord came to Jonah he asked Jonah to do the very same thing he did when he came to Jonah the second time ... "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come before me." But Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was at one time the largest city in the world, and it was notorious for its wicked ways. The people there were known for their violent reaction to criticism, and this obviously terrified Jonah. So, when the Lord told him to go to Nineveh and preach to them about their sinfulness, Jonah, being frightened, headed for Tarshish instead.

Nineveh was east of Jonah's home ... its ruins are in northern Iraq across the river from the present-day city of Mosul. Tarshish was west, across the Mediterranean Sea. Some historians believe that Tarshish is another name for Carthage ... the home of this congregation's namesake, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the third century. Other scholars think Tarshish was located on the Iberian Peninsula in present-day Spain. Anyhow, it was a very, very long distance away from Nineveh. Not only did Jonah not go to Nineveh as the Lord had told him to, but he went to Joppa on the coast of the Mediterranean sea, booked passage on a boat, and set sail for a destination as far from Nineveh as he could get.

Jonah's journey was anything but smooth sailing. As Jonah was sleeping in the hold of the boat a big storm arose. That Jonah was sleeping through the tempest annoyed the sailors who had ordered all hands on deck. When Jonah finally arrived topside the crew cast lots to discover who had angered their god so much that they were caught in this horrible storm ... and, of course, the lot fell to Jonah ... so they threw him overboard.

At this point the story might have been over, but the same Lord that told Jonah to go to Nineveh, and then caused a tempest on the sea as Jonah had tried to flee, now sent a "big fish, or "whale," or "beast"" to swallow Jonah, and Jonah spent three days and three nights in the "belly of the beast."

At the end of three days and nights in the "belly of the beast" Jonah prayed:

"I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; ... Out of the belly of Sheol I cried and you heard my voice. ... You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me: ... As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple."

"Then the Lord spoke to the beast, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." That is how the First Act of the book of Jonah ends. Then the Second Act opens with the words we heard this morning: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." So, at this point in the story it is no wonder that Jonah said, "Yes, sir ... I am on my way to Nineveh!!"

We are only halfway through the story, but I'd like to pause a moment and make some reflections. First a question: Is this story true? Did this really happen? Is this a factual story about a man that was swallowed by a big fish ... or a whale ... or a beast ... lived in the belly of this beast for three days, and then the beast spewed him out onto dry land?

I believe the story is true ... even if it is not factual. I don't know about you, but I know that there have been times in my life when a voice came to me and told me to go in one direction and I turned around and ran the other way. There have also been times when I have headed down a path and a voice said "Don't go there," and I went anyhow. And I can remember the storms I got caught up in, and the people around me who were getting caught in the storm as well. And then, when I was feeling like I was all but dead, something happened and I was given a second chance.

Sometimes that voice that is calling us comes from inside, as if our psyche and soul was speaking to us. Other times it may come in a dream, or maybe out of the mouths of others. And on other occasions it is right there in a mirror, shouting at us.

And those tempests ... those stormy times in our lives seem all the worse because we know that somehow we are responsible for them ... and others were getting hurt because of what we have done. Then, it is as if we are thrown overboard into the deep. Yet, if we are really honest, we know we probably took it upon ourselves to jump, thinking it would be an escape ... ironically, an escape from the very consequences of running away.

I know the story is true because I've lived it. Fortunately for me, when I ended up in the deep, I was swallowed by something, and in that dark smelly place I came to my senses, I made my sincere plea to God, and I came out of it with a second chance. And, when the word of the Lord came to me a second time, I decided I would follow it as if my life depended upon it.

I don't know if any of you have had that experience, but I know that I have. And, I know others who have followed the wrong path ... even when they knew they were really running away from the one leading to wholeness. They headed down the wrong road of life and then were caught up in chaos ... stormy tempests in their lives ... and also dragged a lot of others with them. Maybe it was an addiction, or an affair, or an abusive relationship, or maybe just a bad career choice. But not only was it wrong for them, it also hurt a lot of people close to them in the process ... they were all in the same boat.

We are all made in the image of God. We are all blessed children of God. However, there are times when we forget that, or we make bad choices, or we just fail to live into the fullness of the image of God to which we are called. If we were completely solitary individuals then the only person that would get hurt would be ourselves. However, we are parts of families ... we have friends ... we have careers with co-workers ... and we worship with people we care about. When we end up on that wrong path, and fail to turn around, those others often pay a cost for our choices as well.

The story of Jonah is a story about what happens when we hesitate when the sacred calls us ... when we run away from the divine source of life ... when we make wrong choices and follow paths away from what is holy in our lives. It is also about others getting caught up in the tempest that ensues. And about the place in the belly of the beast where we come to understand something about ourselves that we could not have known any other way. It is about returning from an exile to which we have been banished so that we might once again strive to live in the fullness of God's image.

So, when the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, he listened and he went to Nineveh in spite of his fears. It took him three days to walk across the great city ... the same amount of time he spent in the belly of the beast ... and he was shouting the whole time that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days ... exactly what the Lord had told him to say. Jonah had feared that the people of Nineveh would react violently to his words of condemnation, Yet, lo and behold, the people actually listened to Jonah, and all of them ... including the king ... put on sack cloth and ashes as a sign of repentance. The Lord saw what the people of Nineveh did, and the Lord relented from destroying the city. This is, of course, the portion we heard this morning. This is basically the entire Second Act of the book of Jonah.

Again, this would have been a good place to end the story and say "they lived happily ever after." But that isn't the case ... there is the Epilog. Jonah is angry at the Lord for making a fool out of him. He said to the Lord, "I told you so! That is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place ... 'for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.'"

At this point Jonah is angry and disheartened. He broods, sulks, pouts ... he wants to die. At the end of the Book of Jonah, the Lord compares what he has done with the Ninevites to what has happened to Jonah. If the Lord can love Jonah ... even when he ran away to Tarshish ... and give Jonah a second chance, then why can't he do it also for the people of Nineveh?

One last thought: It may be a stretch, but I think we might be able to say that for the past four years we have been in the belly of the beast. This is not because of one man, or all the people who supported our former president, but because we, as a nation, ran away from our calling ... made some wrong choices along the way ... we followed the wrong path. Those wrong choices weren't just made four years ago, but long before, over many decades, and through many presidential administrations. This nation was being called in one direction, and we ran in another ... away from that calling. In the process we left a lot of people behind ... and as a consequence of that a storm arose.

However, I believe that we, as a nation, have been spewed out onto dry land, and once again we are being called to fulfill our destiny ... we are being called to fulfill the dream of our founding. Just like Jonah, we might be anxious about what we have to do, and it may take us a few metaphorical days to proclaim this news across this big nation of ours, but perhaps ... just perhaps ... all the people of this country might repent so we can be all we can be.

At the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, recited her poem, "The Hill We Climb." In part, she said:

"We've braved the belly of the beast. We've learned that quiet isn't always peace. In the norms and notions of what just is isn't always justice." ...

"When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it."

Is this story about Jonah and the whale true? Did it really happen this way? Those are two separate questions. As far as I am concerned the story is true ... I know that because I've lived the story. Did it really happen the way it is written in the Bible? I doubt it, but that doesn't make it untrue. And if God can forgive Jonah for running away, and forgive the people of Nineveh for their debauchery and licentiousness, then surely God will forgive whatever it is that you and I ... and this nation ... may do to be less than what God intended us to be.

Yes, we are called ... called to live in the image of God. Some of us ... like the disciples Simon, Andrew, James and John ... will follow immediately ... without any hesitation. However, sometimes we hesitate. Sometimes we are scared. Sometimes we procrastinate. Sometimes we want to look at the other options. But, even when we go down a different path God's invitation is still open. We are beloved children of God. God forgives the wrong paths. All God wants is for us to live in the fullest image of God ... individually ... in families ... in communities such as St. Cyprian's ... and in a nation like ours.

Amen.