

3 Epiphany - Year B – January 22, 2012
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
Susan E. Wilmot

At the hospital this week, I met Jeff (not his real name), who said he'd lost his faith. His enthusiasm for all things Christian had fled into the sunset, taking joy as its hostage. Jeff hoped he could find his faith again, as if faith could be lost between the cushions on his sofa. He explained that his problem started when he'd tried to analyze the Gospels. By the time he was done, all that was left was a vast desert of dry questions, without any Living water. His faith was scattered like dust, and his heart filled with the gaping holes of doubt. Sadly, what was once a source of great joy had become a puzzling mess of missing data, discrepancies, and mysterious contradictions. He sounds a lot like Jonah.

There's mystery, joy, and a fair amount of humor in today's text from the Book of Jonah. It's the kind of reading that leaves us with all kinds of questions, and reminds us that God is a mystery. And that living faithfully presents all kinds of challenges to us. There are many types or genres of literature in Scripture including myths and legends, history, and genealogies. Parables, prophecy, songs, poetry, and wisdom literature. Apocalyptic narratives, letters and sermons, and of course the Gospels. No one quite knows what to do with the story of Jonah. Many say it's a fable. The characters *are* somewhat stereotypical. In the Jewish tradition, it's read once a year on the Day of Atonement, probably as a serious message on the efficacy of repentance. Our children instinctively hear the humor in the outrageous exaggerations and candid dialogue of this story. Perhaps they're the ones who are honest enough to see themselves in the reluctant prophet Jonah. As God's children, we too can enjoy the story, as well as its great lessons. Like Jeff, sometimes we take ourselves much too seriously, want all the answers, and secretly want total power and control over everything. Jonah makes it clear that God is in control, so we might as well get used to it.

Jonah's name actually means, "dove". We just need to go back a couple of weeks to the baptism of our Lord, to realize the implications of the dove. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus "like a dove", and then drives Him into the wilderness for forty days. The Holy Spirit also comes as tongues of fire, and sweeping winds of change. Jonah hears God's call, and promptly decides to fly in the opposite direction. Of course, there's nowhere to run too and nowhere to hide from God. Lesson one: God's will will be done! Jonah is a servant of God, and obedience is not optional. God kicks up a storm, and gets Jonah thrown overboard. In the meantime, God manages to convert a bunch of gentile sailors as a kind of collateral benefit of Jonah's disobedience. Wasn't that the plan all along? We pick up the story with God again commanding Jonah to "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Having being graciously delivered from the storm by being vomited onto a beach, Jonah wisely decides not to fight it this time and heads off to Nineveh.

We have to understand that Nineveh is not just any great city. It happens to be the great city at the heart of enemy territory, the capital city of the Assyrians. The same violent force who crushed the northern kingdom of Israel, and kept the southern kingdom of Judah as a vassal state for over one hundred years. Jonah is putting his life on the line to warn his sworn enemies about God's impending judgment, and he's very, very, unhappy with God! Twice in the last couple of weeks, I've either read or heard stories about lives that have gone in very different directions verses the plans that we make for ourselves. Almost everyone who enters ordained ministry can attest to that. At this point, Jonah would give almost anything to have found his life had taken a different direction. The truth is that most times we end up in ministries and vocations that God would choose for us. Somehow, God works it all out. That quirky course that we took in college on a whim ended up equipping us to serve the Lord in a beautiful and unique way. A lifetime of experiences, decisions and choices have shaped each of us to share God's love in distinct ways. That is, as long as we remember lesson two: to lose ourselves in Christ Jesus. Otherwise known, as getting out of

God's way, and making room for the dynamic, creative power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jonah learns the lesson the hard way, with a heart that is hardened by bitterness and hatred of others.

That brings us to lesson number three in our journey with Jonah. If God can relent, and forgive even the brutal and barbaric Assyrians who have tortured and oppressed God's chosen people, why do we work so hard to put limits on our forgiveness of others? Why do we pray every day or at least once a week in the words of the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" if we don't mean it? Why do we instinctively put ourselves in the judge's seat? Someone once said that the most prevalent gift amongst humanity is the gift of righteous indignation! It's a fact of life that we struggle with forgiveness, and also with differences. We have a hard time living and sharing the gift of God's mercy with others or *the other*. Everyone from the teenage lane hopper who cuts us off in traffic, to the neighbor who never cleans up his yard. Or the one we thought of as a friend who gossips behind our back, to the family member who wounds us with a careless word. Of course, this doesn't even begin to cover those we consider enemies of democracy or freedom. Jonah's absolute disgust with God for God's steadfast love, graciousness, and mercy betrays a dark stain that we share in our own hearts and dark spots in our minds. It's very disquieting to consider the wideness of God's mercy. To realize just how far Jesus' bleeding arms on the cross reach out to embrace the whole world with God's love and forgiveness, for all who come to Him in faith.

Jonah is the minimalist prophet *par excellence*. He goes one third of the way into the great city of Nineveh in reluctant obedience to God's commandment. His prophetic word, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" offers no hope, and no mention of the possibility of divine deliverance. He never mentions God, and yet the gentile king of Nineveh, all the people, plus the animals immediately respond to God in repentance. Here's the irony in outrageous colors. Jonah is an insider, the one who knows the heart of God's steadfast love, and graciousness, but also the one who is vindictive and hateful. He's determined to hide the light of God, even though that's Israel's purpose. On the other side of the coin, there's a whole series of Biblical characters that respond to God's call and do God's will faithfully, even though they do not know the One God of Israel. Think of King Cyrus of Persia, who responds to the prophet Jeremiah's word, restores the Temple in Jerusalem, and proclaims liberty to the exiles. Think of the Ruth, the Moabite, who faithfully follows Naomi and becomes a Jewish proselyte. Ruth shows up again in Jesus' genealogy. Remember the Syrophenician woman, another despised gentile, whose faith in Jesus secures her daughter's healing. The Ninevites, also foreigners and enemies of God's chosen people hear God's voice in Jonah's abbreviated prophecy and believe. Even more importantly, they immediately put their faith into action. And isn't this the crux of lesson number four? That genuine faith is always expressed appropriately in responsiveness: in turning away from evil, with heartfelt repentance, in love towards all our neighbors, through forgiveness, with deeds of mercy and compassion, and in grace-filled words of Good News for all people?

Even though he said he'd lost his faith, Jeff shared another story of God's amazing presence and grace in his life after a serious accident. Prophets speak to us with a message from God. They bring the immanence of God to our attention and help us to re-focus. It's not an easy calling. Perhaps the final gift of today's reading is not in the text, but is simply to remember just how much God loves us. There are always more lessons to learn, great and wonderful surprises in store. Just like Jonah's many changes of direction, let's welcome the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in our faith community, leading us in new directions to fulfill our mission in Christ's name.

Amen.