

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
January 24, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62:6-14

Have you ever accidentally subscribed to something? You accepted a free trial of a magazine, or 14 books for \$1 from Book-of-the-Month Club, and then you forgot to cancel it before the trial period is over. Well, that happened to me this month. I subscribed to a free trial of CBS All Access on my Apple TV device, and then I forgot to cancel it. Okay, to be honest, I am not all sure how I subscribed to that free trial, because I am not always sure which button means what action on the sleek little remote that came with my Apple TV device. But, however it happened, I subscribed to this free-trial, and then forgot to cancel it, so I am stuck paying \$20 to subscribe to CBS All Access when I already receive CBS with my cable television.

Not smart. Please don't tell my children. So, having spent the \$20 for the month of January, I decided to use it by binge-watching a favorite old TV show called *The Good Wife*. I am having a good time watching great actors and remembering a compelling story, and I am getting really good at using my Apple TV remote, because I use it to skip all of the introductory material that shows at the beginning of each episode. You know, the scenes that follow the phrase, "previously on *The Good Wife*," which I really don't need to watch, because after all, I have seen this before, AND I am watching show after show without a week in between episodes.

However, that is not how we are reading the Bible together Sunday by Sunday. We are not hearing one episode after another in the Biblical stories. As a matter of fact, we are jumping around a bit between Biblical books—and to be honest, I might just remember some of the stories from *The Good Wife* better than I remember the stories of the minor prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.

So, I know that you will forgive me—and that you won't push fast forward when I say—"previously in my preaching. . . ." In last week's sermon, you may have heard me say this: "God uses the least likely people from the least likely places to get God's work done." Last week, we heard the story of God calling the boy Samuel in the Temple. It took Samuel awhile to hear God's call, but eventually he figured out the God was calling, and he stopped talking enough to hear what God wanted him to do.

Well, this week, we meet some more unlikely heroes of faith. In our first lesson today, we hear that God called Jonah a second time. That means, of course, that God called Jonah a first time, even though we don't read about it today. It really is one of the best stories in the Bible. So, indulge me again: *previously in the book of Jonah. . .*

God speaks to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was one of the largest cities in the known world. Everybody knew where it was. If they had a map in front of them they could point to it, right down there, in the southeastern corner of the known world. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, so immediately, Jonah goes down to the wharf and gets on a boat headed for Tarshish—the all the way across the Mediterranean Sea, in the northwestern edge of the known world. God says, "Go!" [preacher points down and stage right] and Jonah goes [preacher points up and stage left]!

But even if you have just tuned in, you know that you can't run away from God. And we all know this about God: God is faithful. When God promises something, God gives it. And when God wants something, God uses the least likely people in the least likely places to get the job done.

There is Jonah on the ship, trying to out-run God and a big storm comes up—and Jonah realizes that God is trying to get his attention. So before the ship is swamped and all the innocent sailors perish, Jonah jumps overboard, where he is swallowed by a great, big fish.

Jonah is an unlikely hero, trapped there in the belly of the beast. Speaking of unlikely heroes, let me be one of the hundreds of preachers this morning to quote Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman. Ms. Gorman stole the show at President Biden's inauguration this week with her poem "The Hill We Climb."¹ *"We've braved the belly of the beast,"* she said, referring to the ancient story of Jonah in the belly of the great fish. And then she told us that being stuck like that can teach us a thing or two.

*We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
and the norms and notions
of what just is
isn't always just-ice.*

God lets Jonah travel around inside the belly of the fish for three days before the fish spews him out onto the dry land. Here is our hero, the reluctant prophet. He has been on the lam for a while. He doesn't have any possessions. He hasn't eaten since before the storm started. He is wet and slimy from being inside that great fish, but maybe, just maybe, he has learned a thing or two. And this is where today's lesson joins the story.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, . . . and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." God is giving Jonah a do-over. And Jonah may be reluctant, but he is not stupid. He gets up and goes to Nineveh.

He takes a three-day's walk through the city, proclaiming God's wrath on the wicked citizens. And there was something about Jonah that made the people pay attention, something that called them to heed God's warning. Jonah was so filled with God's word that his warning was irresistible to them. And so, they put on sackcloth and sat in ashes, traditional signs of mourning and repentance, and *[w]hen God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.*

We have known all along that God is faithful, and that God uses unlikely people to get the work done. But now, we learn a new thing about God. *God changed his mind.* God, all mighty, all-powerful, all knowing—why would God change the divine mind?

Of course, God did not *need* to change the divine mind. God *wanted* to do something other than what had been promised. God loved those wicked people in Nineveh. God loved them so much that God went to considerable trouble to bring them a prophet they would listen to. And when they listened to that smelly prophet, God could do what God had

¹ <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a35279603/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript/>

wanted to do all along: forgive them. And then, God was able to be in relationship with them, because what **just was**, wasn't necessarily God's **justice**.

We know that God is faithful. And we know that God calls the least likely folks to do God's work. And now we know that God wants a relationship with us so much that God will even change the divine mind to bring God's justice to earth.

And that brings us to the quartet of unlikely heroes in our Gospel story for this morning: Simon (whom we will later call Peter) and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. But before we talk about how unlikely it is that these poor fishermen can bring divine justice, we hear this:

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Previously, in the Gospel of Mark, we heard the story of John, how we ate bugs and honey, and wore an itchy old blanket instead of a finely woven robe, and how he told everybody how sinful they were, washed them clean in the muddy Jordan river—and then got arrested for his trouble.

John was just answering the call of God, to tell the people that they should think more about divine things and less about earthly things, and he is in jail. Apparently, this is not a safe place to be or message to share. And so, of course, it is exactly the message that Jesus takes up.

Right here, and right now, says Jesus. God is with us now! How could that be? Where was the face of God? Where was the reign of God? Their prophet had tried to bring them into some kind of community, and now he was in jail. That may have seemed just to Herod, but it was not justice for God's people.

This was Galilee. There was nothing there! It was a stony, barren wilderness, populated by poor people who were barely able to scratch out a living. If the rains came, there would be water for the next year. If the rains came, the Sea of Galilee would be full enough and fresh enough that the fishing would be good. But Jesus wasn't coming along promising rain or good fishing. What good news could there possibly be?

This is the mystery that we worship. That God could walk among us, just as poor as we are, and promise us that God is with us now! Jesus, in himself, is God come to earth to show us how much we are loved. Jesus is the Good News. And that Good News is what justice looks like to God—not some balance of he's right and she's wrong. Not, you are rich and I am poor. God's justice looks like God loving the people. And more, because with God there is always more: God's justice looks like God's people loving one another.

And so, Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John, and Jesus calls every one of us: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people.* That is, we are called to help gather the people that God loves into the community of God's justice.

One day, this pandemic will spew us all out of the belly of the beast. We will not be stuck here forever! Indeed, even now, God calls us to work and to love for the good of God's people. And it is not normal, and it may not seem just, but God's love **is** God's justice. And that is Good News.