

“Follow me”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday January 24, 2021

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

I love both our scriptures this morning.
The story of Jonah has always captured me.
Jonah is a prophet of God.
He speaks God’s word to God’s people.

But one day God sends Jonah not to his own people but to his enemies.
God asks Jonah to go where he doesn’t want to go.

Jonah decides to go in the opposite direction from God’s plan.
He gets on a boat and heads to Tarshish.
And we know what happens, a big storm comes up- which is all Jonah’s fault, and to save themselves the crew on the boat had to throw Jonah into the ocean.
And Jonah is then swallowed by a large fish.

So lesson #1 if you try to run away from God and God’s call, be careful and keep looking over your shoulder because a large fish might swallow you at any moment.

By chapter 3 and the passage we read today, Jonah has been spit up by the large fish and he found himself on the shores of Ninevah.

God’s word comes to Jonah again, just like it did at the beginning of the story: “Go to the great city of Ninevah and proclaim my message to them.”

Jonah’s heart still wasn’t in the mission he’s been given, but he reluctantly goes and starts speaking God’s word.

“40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown.”

Ninevah is a big city.

It would take three days to walk across the city.

Jonah goes a days journey and then starts to speak.

He’s not in the heart of the city.

He’s not near the courts of the King and the seat of power.

He’s preaching on the outskirts and his message isn’t particularly inspiring or hopeful.

“40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown.”

But the people hear message as the word of God and they respond.

Somehow the king of Ninevah heard the message and not only does he respond, but he calls all the people of the city to respond.

They repent.

They turn from their wickedness and their evil ways and humble themselves before God.

Sackcloth and ashes for everyone from the greatest to the least.

And God has mercy on the Ninevites.

God spares them just as Jonah was afraid God would.

Jonah knows of God's mercy, Jonah prayed for that mercy for himself when he was in the belly of the fish.

Everywhere in the story of Jonah we have God showing mercy.

God showed mercy to his people sending Jonah to them to speak his word.

God showed mercy to the sailors during the storm and he saved them all.

God showed mercy to Jonah not letting him drown in the ocean.

God showed mercy to Jonah rescuing him from the belly of the fish.

And then God shows mercy to the people of Ninevah not destroying them.

God is the God of mercy and the God of life.

When we turn to the gospels, we have Jesus calling the fishermen.

I expect they thought Jesus would be a zealot, a revolutionary, and they were going to turn the tables on the Romans, defeat their enemies.

I imagine they were looking for someone like John the Baptist that would bring everyone to their knees in repentance.

But again, Jesus was sent by the God of mercy.

Jesus' love is extended to the outcasts, the sinners, to Roman leaders and leaders of the Synagogue.

The cry on the cross is for our forgiveness.

There is no one beyond the mercy and love of God.

Jesus came to bring life.

God sent Jonah with a word that brought new life.

And notice that the word is effective.

Jesus calls the disciples and they leave everything and follow him.

Jonah cried out to the city in judgment and all the people are convicted and hear it as the word of God.

They stop what they are doing and respond to God, the Living God.

The disciples hear Jesus' invitation and immediately they are up and following him.

God's word is merciful and gracious, even when it is a word of judgment.
God's intent for Ninevah was to bring them life – not death.

The disciples, after leaving everything, began an adventure of a lifetime.
It took them to people and places they wouldn't have gone, it stretched them, and taught them.
And the heights and depths of God's love, shown in Jesus was revealed to them.

And we are invited to follow in their shoes.

Jonah was a much more reluctant disciple.
He spoke God's life giving, effective word, and he saved his enemies.

And we are left not knowing what happened to Jonah.
Did he every really understand God's mercy and love that was shown first to him, and then to his enemies?

Did God send him on another adventure?

We don't know.
But I am sure that God's mercy continued to follow Jonah.

And what we do know is the love and mercy, and the call of God in our lives.

And daily we choose how we will answer.
Sometimes reluctantly, sometimes immediately, sometimes not understanding, and sometimes we are sent where we'd rather not go.

But however we go, we carry in us the effective word of God, a word that brings life.
A word, even when it is a hard word, or a word of judgment, it is a word that brings mercy and love.

Let us pray:
God your mercy and love pursue us. You are gracious and merciful. And you call us to follow you, to go where you go, even when it is difficult, and ask us to make your mercy and grace known in this world. Show us how to do that today, in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.