



Lectionary Study Guide

For use the week of January 15-21, 2024

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

January 21, 2024

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

^{3:1} The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

^{3:10} When 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.

Commentary

This reading finds Jonah, the reluctant prophet, at last obeying God's will and traveling to the great but sin-filled city of Nineveh (in modern Iraq). It took a storm at sea, three days in a fish's belly, and another call from the Lord – but Jonah finally went to Nineveh, the capital of ancient Assyria. In his secret heart, Jonah was hoping that the Ninevites would reject the message of repentance that he carried to them. And then, when the city failed to heed God's call to turn from their sin, he, Jonah, could watch with satisfaction as the Lord blew it to smithereens. But that's not what happened! The WHOLE city repented – from the king to the lowliest commoners, fasting and wearing sackcloth.

Jonah was disappointed in God's mercy, angry that God spared all of these wayward people. He was reminded that it is not only Israel that God cares for, but the world entire – even the places and people we like the least.

Reflection

Who are the Ninevites of our day – people whom God likes, but we don't? The poor? The homeless? The Middle Eastern people? The uncultured? People whose politics differ from ours?

How might God be calling us to minister to the outsider, and calling US into repentance at the same time?

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

^{7:29} I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Commentary

Paul and many of the early Christians expected Jesus Christ to return imminently – while they were still alive. The “Second Coming” – which for us is an event at the far end of time, about which we pray and profess belief, but having for most of us an unreal quality – that Coming for the early believers was a “maybe today? Maybe tomorrow?” possibility. Hence Paul’s words here about marriage. Keep your focus on God – the only One who really matters, Paul counsels the Corinthians, because the days are short. The “present form of the world is passing away.” Paul was encouraging the people to live for the eternal, and not for the here-and-now.

Reflection

Is there a way we can live as though Christ might come tomorrow, while not taking the drastic and extreme measures that the “end of the world” prophets like Harold Camping urge upon their followers? (Harold Camping predicted that the world would end on May 21, 2011, and when it didn’t, he moved his prediction up to October 21, 2011. We are all still here.) How can we really be “in the world but not of it,” as God calls us to be?

Mark 1:14-20

^{1:14} Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." ¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Commentary

This reading contains both an announcement and an appeal: “the time is fulfilled,” and “Repent and believe the Good News.” Both announcement and appeal are incredibly profound, if we believe and act on them.

In telling the people that the “Kingdom of God had come near,” he was saying to them that they need no longer be ruled in their hearts by worldly kings and monarchs: a new kingdom, one of God’s justice and peace, was being ushered in. A new time in human history has begun!

And “repent”: that word means “turn around.” It can also mean “rethink.” Rethink what you are doing, how you are living, Jesus says, and turn around and see a new life before you. A new time, and a new life: all that is left for us to do when we really HEAR those two announcements is to accept Jesus’ invitation to “Follow me.” The first disciples did: they just dropped everything (even their poor old Daddy!) and followed Jesus.

Reflection

Have you heard Jesus’ proclamation of a new time and a new life? Have you ever felt God calling you to something: to a job, a person, to a ministry? Remember, a “call” is not just something that ordained clergy people experience – we are ALL called by Jesus, every day, in many and subtle ways. What is he calling you to, at the beginning of a new year?

Psalm 62:5-12

- ^{62:5} For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
- ⁶ **He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.**
- ⁷ On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
- ⁸ **Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.**
- ⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.
- ¹⁰ **Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.**
- ¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:

that power belongs to God,
¹² **and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.**
For you repay to all according to their work.

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**