

Westgate Baptist Community
Sunday 22nd January 2006

Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, 10, I Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20.

Turning Toward the Call of God
A Sermon by Geoff Wraight

The well-known catching big fish story... (“the fish just keeps getting bigger and bigger!”)

And “never let the truth get in the way of a good story”

– but in Jewish tradition it is almost the reverse – that is, you cannot convey the truth effectively without a good story..

Elie Wiesel quote: “God created man because he loves Stories”

The story of Jonah and the big fish is full of satire and exaggeration and has some genuinely funny parts - it is the Biggest Big Fish story ever – but it carries some powerful and wonderful truth about God and God’s call..

Let me refresh your memory a little about the story.

Retelling the story of Jonah:

God calls upon Jonah to proclaim a word of judgment against the city of Nineveh a huge metropolis teeming with people and greed. Jonah, instead, doesn’t have any desire to be the bad news boy and runs away. He takes off down to Virgin Blue Water lines at Joppa buys a discount ticket and boards a ship for a distant port called Tarshish. But Jonah's escape is foiled by the perfect storm whipped up by God to get Jonah’s attention. In typical “ignore him and he’ll go away attitude” Jonah is asleep in the hold of the ship during this major life and death crisis. Jonah draws the short straw and therefore is forced to fess-up that he is the one responsible for God’s rather close attention. One gets the feeling that Jonah is prone to fits of depression and despair and so he tells the sailors to toss him overboard. This they very reluctantly do and the storm immediately calms – whereby the sailors all are converted to the God of Jonah and make solemn vows to him.

Meanwhile Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish. In the depths of despair Jonah acknowledges God and God makes the big fish spit out Jonah unceremoniously on dry land.

When God calls upon Jonah a second time to proclaim a message to Nineveh, Jonah very reluctantly agrees. Kind of, “Oh alright, if you insist – I guess I’ll have to do it..!” (one gets the impression he might like the bellies of big fish)

The City of Nineveh is three days walk across and Jonah goes only part of the way into the city and keeps the message to one short sentence, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (v. 4). You can almost hear the mumble. “Speak up Jonah – what did you say? In forty days there’s going to be a big sale? No? Oh, in forty days the city is going to be destroyed” Ok...

The response is nothing short of spectacular!

And the people of Nineveh believed that this call came from the great God, so they took immediate action. They called a day of repentance, and everybody, no matter what their rank in society, dressed in funeral clothes and went without food to show that they were serious about changing their ways.⁶ When the message reached the king of Nineveh, he got up off his throne, threw down his royal robes, dressed rags, and sat down in the dirt. ⁷ Then he issued a

public proclamation throughout Nineveh, authorized by him and his leaders: "Not one drop of water, not one bite of food for man, woman, or animal, including your herds and flocks! **8** Dress them all, both people and animals, in funeral clothes, and send up a cry for help to God. Everyone must turn around, turn back from an evil life and the violent ways that stain their hands. **9** Who knows? Maybe God will turn around and change his mind about us, stop being angry with us and let us live!" **10** .

.....Seeing what they did, and how they really were turning away from evil and getting their lives back on track, God had a change of heart. The disaster that God had been planning for the people of Nineveh was cancelled.

But Jonah is really peeved off about this turn of events! He even says to God – “There, told you so - you’re such a big softie – always being gracious and merciful, slow to get angry and quick to forgive people what they’ve got comin! - I’ve had enough!!” And in a fit of despair he sits down and sulks on a hill outside of the city – hoping that God might still nuke the lot of them..

God teaches him patiently about his anger and forgiveness by causing a bush to grow next to him – give him shade then die the next day leaving Jonah in despair again. You almost get the feeling that Jonah is suffering from bi-polar disease... And there the story ends..

It is a story of quick turnarounds - Jonah turning to and from God, the Ninevites turning to God, and God turning from judgment to mercy. God's mercy will override God's judgment.

But I think there are more subtle lessons we can learn from this funny story about the nature of God’s call on Jonah and indeed the Ninevites lives.. And by implication, the nature of God’s call on our own lives..

First, God’s call is always a call towards not just a call from

(cf in the Gospel reading today Jesus calls the disciples to leave their nets and follow him....) Repentance is always a turning toward as well as a turning away..

Jonah was called to give a message – He was not called to take responsibility for the whole show. God’s call is a gracious invitation to participate in his work in the world. The call to follow Jesus is a gracious invitation to get involved in something bigger than ourselves or our own little world.

Second – that God is gone before us and the call involves trusting and cooperating with the Spirit of life and Peace at work in the world..

Jonah’s half-hearted mumbled message and the overwhelming response of the people. We will never be able to anticipate what God is doing through others before we arrive on the scene.

This truth will also free us from being obsessed with getting the credit for things that we do. Instead we should learn to rejoice and celebrate the steps toward justice and peace that are being taken by many and sometimes by the least expected means or people. Turning toward God’s call means being open and attentive to the movements of the spirit in the lives and circumstances we face every day.

Third – God’ never gives up calling us – it is an ongoing journey of hearing and response, mis- hearing and getting it wrong, ignoring the message altogether only to find that God is still waiting lovingly and patiently for us to listen again.

The amazing thing about the story is that God uses Jonah despite his pessimistic and cynical attitude - but he has a lesson coming and God deals with his anger and teaches him through his own suffering – so that even in his pain and disappointment God brings wisdom and new insight.

Conclusion

The call of God comes to each one of us in different ways, What are you being called to turn away from today?
- What are you being called to turn toward?

The act of **turning toward** as a definition of what Christian faith is all about.

The act of turning toward God's call can transform our attitudes and open us to see the work of God in ways that will amaze and stun us.

I believe it is this same attitude of expectancy that Paul is urging the Corinthian Christian Community to have in the context of the expected second coming of Christ. As we read in the other New Testament reading for today.

It is an expectancy and hope that transforms the way that you live.

Read I Corinthians 7:29-31 in Nathan's paraphrase:

Sisters and brothers,
.....the present circumstances of our lives
.....are not the be all and end all,
.....because time is almost up.

From now on, don't get too bound up in anything,
.....but live in light of what is to come:

those who are married
.....as though they are still waiting for love;

those who are grieving
.....as though comfort is within reach;

those who are celebrating
.....as though real joy is yet to come;

those who are shopping
.....as though there is nothing worth owning;

those who are involved in business and politics
.....as though they are of no consequence.

Why?
.....Because the world as we know it
.....is on the way out.

It is what makes the difference between a person who just happens to go to church and one whose whole outlook on the world is being transformed.

It is what makes the difference between a youth group that is basically just another social group of friends and a group of young people on fire for a greater cause..

It is what makes the difference for a church like Westgate to be more than just a regular gathering of like minded Christians but instead a transforming and transformed community..

We stand on the threshold of a new year at a time when we live in a nation that seems so totally immersed in self-interest and totally oblivious to the enormous injustices being perpetrated in the world at their doorstep.

In turning towards the call of God, In turning towards the heart of God – there are some key areas where I reckon you just might find God is at work already and like Jonah you might get a big surprise when you hear and respond to God’s call to get involved..

The issue of Asylum seekers and refugees in this country.

The issue of Reconciliation and the status of the first Australians

The Planet’s environmental and climate crisis.

The ongoing unimaginable gap between the rich and the poor.

To name a few..

What are we being called to turn away from in order to follow Christ?

What are we being called to turn toward?

Let’s spend some moments of contemplation before the offering is received...

Play music...”If I could be where you are” - Enya.

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