

Jonah

This is a wonderful piece of scripture. It's funny, it's sad, it holds up a mirror to show us a part of ourselves we'd rather not see – and it proclaims the amazing, unbelievable, uncompromising love and grace of God, which is broader and more far reaching than our little brains can ever begin to grasp. This is simply GREAT stuff!

The readings after epiphany are asking us to consider the theme of call.

What does it mean to be called by God? What are some of the different ways people hear God calling? What are some of the things people are called to do?

We sometimes get stuck thinking, or at least using the word “call” only about ordered ministry. But the truth is – and scripture it witness to it, as are you in your own lives – God calls people to a wonderful variety of tasks, depending on our own personalities, abilities and life circumstances; and depending too, upon what the needs of the dream of God are at any given time in history.

What has been your experience of the call of God? What things has God called you to do? How did you hear that call? Some people feel and hear God calling clearly through dramatic experiences: like Paul on the road to Damascus, or Samuel in the temple from last week.

Often, though, the call is more like a nudge...a cramp in your conscience, a quiet feeling – it might come through other people, as a result of a thinking process, or sometimes, there's just all of a sudden a need or opportunity that you had nothing to do with, but it's there, and you do what needs to be done. God's call comes in lots of different ways.

We're not told a lot about how God's call came to Jonah – it just says (VERSE 1)

We don't know exactly how it came, but we do know what he did about it.

Jonah is so funny – he doesn't try to be subtle at all. He runs away. Other prophets made up excuses: tried to tell God why they couldn't do the job ...do you remember some of their excuses?

Moses

Jeremiah

Isaiah

Jonah didn't even try that. As far as we know, he didn't say a thing. He just took off.

Why?

God had asked him to go to Nineveh, a very wicked city, it says, and tell them that what they were doing and how they were living was wrong.

Nineveh?

Nineveh was full of Assyrians. They were the traditional enemies of Israel. Assyrians. Enemies. Foreigners.

Frederick Buechner says it this way:

“When God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, the expression on Jonah's face was that of a man who has just gotten a whiff of trouble in his septic tank”.

Usually, prophets were called to speak to their own people and call them back to the ways of God, and that was hard enough. But to have to go to a foreign city, a city full of the very people who had been Israel's enemies for ages – it was more than he could take.

I don't know what parallel I could make with you now – I suppose something like how some people felt about the Germans or Japanese during the war....I know we could make more current connections.

Being called to be a prophet had probably sounded good to him – an honour, you know....to be called to join the ranks of Isaiah and Jeremiah – wow.

But THEN to find out he has to be a prophet to the Assyrians...that changed everything.

It's funny, isn't it, how good it sounds in theory to follow Jesus, and be a faithful disciple, that sounds sonice. “Here I am, Lord” we sing. “ I will go, Lord, if you lead me”

and then.....

we find out where we're being led.

Often it's to very ordinary, thankless, unglamorous places and tasks. Love your neighbour. That sounds so great. Then you get a look at some of your neighbours. And Jesus, in that astounding parable, goes even further, and says that our neighbour is a Samaritan, one of the despised, one of the enemies.

So Jonah runs. Why? He can't stand Assyrians. The people of Nineveh are beneath him, and he didn't see why he should have anything to do with them. Why can't they just help themselves? Why can't they just take responsibility for themselves, why should we have to help? It'll just feed into a pattern of dependence.

Not only that, they had been Israel's enemies – they'd been at war - how far do we have to go for people who are our enemies? Really – how far?

So he ran away. On a boat, whose sailors were – you got it – foreigners. He's not even consistent. He can't stand foreigners but if they're useful to him then they're ok. Please, let our immigration policies not be Jonah based. But I digress.

You know the part about the storm, and Jonah being thrown overboard, and the great fish. I hope you don't waste any energy wondering how or if a fish could swallow a person and then throw him up alive. People have actually researched that and tried to prove it could or could not happen. AS IF THAT WERE THE POINT OF THIS STORY. To focus on that in my opinion, is a waste of time and a mad misreading of the purpose of this book.

I always think of the fish spitting him out because he was so bitter. He really was a bitter man. I think the fish just couldn't stomach him.

So there he is, on the beach, wet, covered in fish vomit, blinking his eyes because he hasn't seen the sun in 3 days, and God says

“Shall we try this again?”

He went.

He preached. And the people listened. They really did. Even the King. And all the people and the animals too, it says. The whole city believed God's word and repented.

That seems like it should be the end of the story, doesn't it?

But the real point comes only now.

What did Jonah say, how did he feel, when the city repented, and when God repented too, and forgave them?

Was he happy for the Ninevites? Even a self-centred prophet might say “I must be REALLY good!”

No. None of those things. He sulked.

4: 1-2

That's very real, and very sad.

He didn't WANT them to repent. He wanted to see God punish them.

He wanted to see them hurt. He wanted them to suffer and he wanted to see it.

He couldn't be happy for them and he resented the grace of God. He wasn't surprised by it (verse 1) but he really resented it.

What is it about us, about humans, that makes us like that?

Not able to rejoice when someone turns his or her life around...have you noticed that?

If someone succeeds, turns around, gets their life together, what you hear lots is “Oh yea well I remember when they....” and then they get telling all the old stuff...why?

Or people will try to tempt people back into their old ways. I've been where people think it's funny to spike the drink of someone who has got sober. WHY?

What is it about us that enjoys seeing people suffer? When someone is going through a bad time, having trouble in some way, especially if that trouble has to do with relationships, or is sexual in any way, people hear that, repeat it to others, ...over and over and over. There are tv programmes whose whole purpose seems to be to repeat gossip about famous people. And I've been watching the political coverage of the republican party in the states...

I don't know. I think there's a difference somehow between information that's important to know, on the one hand, and *enjoying* the brokenness of people as a form of entertainment.

And then there's the whole discourse around what jails should look like and what should happen when people are incarcerated for crimes.

We want people punished.

Jonah sulked because he wanted to see them suffer. And he resented the grace of God, was disappointed when they repented.

We're funny mixtures, aren't we? In Jonah we see a wee part of ourselves as if in a mirror, and it's not a pretty sight.

But thank God that Scripture is not only a mirror, in which we see ourselves, but also a window, through which we see God.

And the final word from the book of Jonah is the grace of God. All through this story, the wonder of the grace of God seeps through. What an awesome God we serve!

God's grace and love are so far beyond us....broader and more encompassing than we can imagine. And when we CAN imagine, broader and more encompassing than we'd like!

Out of grace, God called Jonah to be a prophet.

God knew what kind of man he was, maybe choosing him because of his bitterness, to give him a chance to grow. Hmm...

God called this man, a coward, full of self righteousness and hardness of heart – God called him to be a prophet. Who but God would do that???

We have so much to learn about God's ways. And I'm so thankful for the power of scripture to keep showing us that over and over .

If God can call and work through Jonah, then even I have a chance of serving.

And here is God, repenting!

Offering the people of Nineveh chance after chance to repent and meaning it.

God's will is NEVER to punish. God is always bending over backwards to offer us life. Wholeness, salvation. And truly, God delights when people turn and accept that offer. God is not a punishing vengeful figure but a God of patience and forgiveness and compassion. \

FOR EVERYONE.

God offers all of that to you today.

Accept it.

God will never turn you away.

Accept it and then go from here to share it with others.

Amen.