

## **Sermon: Who Knows?**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, January 24, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is something fishy about the two call stories in the Lectionary readings this week — the story of Jesus calling on the first four disciples in the Gospel of Mark 1, and the story of Jonah preaching to Nineveh in the Book of Jonah, chapter 3. As we continue in the season of Epiphany, examining how Jesus was first revealed to the world, we continue to look at call stories, at how lives of ordinary individuals were impacted when called to do God's work.

The story in Mark is fairly straight forward. Jesus began his earthly ministry on the shore of Galilee, by proclaim the good news of God, that "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) Four fishermen — Simon, Andrew, James and John — were called by Jesus to follow, to become fisher of men, or more politically correct — fisher of people. Immediately, they dropped their nets, left their boats, abandoned their sole mean of earning a living, their security, and even their families, just so to follow an itinerant preacher, who was just coming into the scene. As I said earlier, there is something fishy about this call story, not so much the fish part, but the unfathomable power of Christ to have immediate impacts on lives of total strangers, simply by inviting them through a few words.

Early in my seminary study, I came across a story of a preacher who had preached the same sermon two Sundays in a row. Members of his congregation were perplexed, confused, but nobody said a word. By the third Sunday when the preacher again was about to preach the same sermon, someone finally stood up, gathered enough courage and questioned him, "We have heard the same sermon twice already! Why are you preaching it again?" The preacher replied, unapologetically, "Because you have yet to obey the first sermon, so I will continue to preach the same one until you do." I remember thinking that preacher was tad bit arrogant, unrealistically demanding. However, as I have become more experienced in ministry, and have preached over hundreds of sermons, I am beginning

to sympathize with that preacher. Don't worry, I am not about to preach the same sermon again and again until you obey, but perhaps, once, just once, I would like to see someone's life immediately and irrevocably transformed, simply by the words that I preached. Is that too much to ask of God?

There is also something fishy about the the call of Jonah to preach against Nineveh. Not about the fish that swallowed Jonah, but about what he actually said when he finally arrived at the city, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!", and more importantly about how the people responded, repented overwhelmingly, wholeheartedly.

You see, Jonah really is a unique kind of prophet — resistant, stubborn, and unrepentant, in another word — totally human. All throughout the Old Testament when God called, people respond affirmatively. Abraham went to a foreign land based on an unclear instruction and a vague promise. Moses returned to Egypt with a mere shepherd's staff and a brother to speak for him. Elijah stood defiant on Mount Carmel, facing four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. But not Jonah. Jonah stood on the dock, with a ticket to Tarshish. All over the New Testament people were getting up and following Jesus. We just read about Simon, Andrew, James and John. Not just fishermen, tax collectors were forgoing their ledgers, Women (upstanding or not) abandoning their stations, people leaving their parents, families. Let's not forget about Apostle Paul, who traveled across the Mediterranean preaching the words. But not Jonah. Jonah stood on the dock, with a ticket to Tarshish.

When God first called him to head east to the great city of Nineveh, to preach against it. Jonah headed west, in an all-futile effort to out run God on the open sea. Didn't he know that when God created heaven and earth, he first calmed the primordial sea? I mean seriously, the sea is God's favourite playground.

The problem that Jonah had was not fear. Fear, we could understand, for Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, known for its war-like tenacity and inhumane cruelty. They were Israel's mortal enemies through history, and certainly would not look kindly on a 'minor' prophet of a foreign God, spewing some doomsday nonsense. The problem with Jonah was that, he was a true patriot. His love for Israel would not allow him to entertain any notion of loving thy enemies. He is more of a ten-thousand-eyes-for-an-eye, a ten-thousand-teeth-for-an-tooth type of guy. He knew the mere act of preaching against someone or something may actually provoke the possibility of repentance, however improbable.

Furthermore, Jonah knew God all too well. He knew that even a mere thought of regret, or a mere gesture of turning around, would be sufficiently treasured by God who is ever so gracious and compassionate, ever so slow to anger and rich in love. Jonah wasn't about to become an instrument of God's forgiveness. He wasn't about to become a conduit of God's salvation. Send me to Samaria or to Judah, to Bersheba, heck I will even go to Edom if you insist. But Nineveh? Seriously? Let them be damned! Good riddance! But God had another plan. God wasn't about to let go of those whom he called, had commissioned. God sent a giant fish, swallowed Jonah up, and let him stew in its bellow for three days, until the prophet was properly marinated and ready to speak God's words, to do God's work once again.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." (Jonah 3:1-2) Notice the similarity of this command to the first one given in chapter 1 verse 2, with but one significant difference. No longer were Jonah to 'preach against' Nineveh, but to 'proclaim to' it. No longer were the spoken words of God set in direct opposition to that great city, they now leaves open a possibility, of change, of repentance, a sliver of grace.

Of course Jonah noticed the difference, he knew right from the beginning of who God is. With no choice but to fulfill his vow, Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord, but he gave his bare minimum, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" No context, no condition, no persuasion, just forty days more, you guys are toast! Take that!

Yet somehow, from the mouth of this reluctant preacher with an impure heart the words of the Lord would not return void, but would accomplish what God pleases and achieve the purpose for which God sent it. The people of Nineveh believed God! They proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great or small, put on sackcloth, mourned and sat in ashes. When news of the impending doom reached the king, he instructed, "all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may yet relent.

**Who knows? God may yet relent, and God did.**

Elie Wiesel, the well-known author and Holocaust survivor, explains in the Preface of his book “Messengers of God”, that stories of the Bible are told and retold, not simply to recount history, but to allow history to unfold in the present. As we encounter these haunting and distant figures of the past, our lives become inexplicably involved. Often, it is only in light of our own lived experiences, we come to understand these stories of the Bible.

How then do we make sense of ‘Who knows?’ These words spoken by a foreign king of a brutal people, these words that spoke of humility, of deference, of the truth that no one really knows the will of God, despite often claims of likewise. How do we make sense of the story of Jonah where the prophet is so identifiable yet so unlikeable, whereas this unnamed foreign king spoke of repentance, of turning from one’s own evil way, of letting God be God?

Well, first of all, I think we need to be honest with ourselves, to come clean on our own bias, our own prejudice. Frank Luntz is a Republican pollster and strategist. As he witnessed first-hand the riot on the Capital Hill on January 6, he went on CBC News and gave his honest thought. While discussing the sickness of the American democratic system and the toxicity of its political discourse, emotional and visibly distraught, he asked, “How? How have we come to this?” Wishing he could have done more, and challenging people from both side of the political spectrum to stand up, he further added, “we need love, we need respect, civility and decency... to work together, to heal the nation.”

The second lesson we can learn from the story of Jonah is never be too sure of one’s own understanding of God, or one’s own interpretation of the Scripture. At the January meeting of the Presbytery of Ottawa, two overtures from a local congregation were debated, on how they are to be transmitted to the General Assembly, as part of the on-going debate in our denomination on the issue of human sexuality. I won’t go into the details of what the overtures ask, but would highlight one reason provided in ‘WHEREAS’. It states,

“WHEREAS, a deviation from a traditional interpretation of scripture regarding marriage and the ordination practices of the PCC separates the PCC from the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”

What the author is claiming is that, any non-traditional readings of the scripture outside of their own understanding is plain wrong, resulting in being separated from the universal Church, thus in the loss of God's salvation. Really? Perhaps the author of those overtures need to be reacquainted to our 'Reformed' tradition as one that is always reforming in obedience to Scripture and under the the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit. It certainly wouldn't wouldn't hurt for either side of this debate to show a bit of humility and uncertainty. Who knows?

The final lesson we can learn is not from Jonah, but from Jesus Christ our Lord, not at the beginning of his earthly ministry, but near the end. Facing the shadow of the cross, knowing what God the Father has ordained him to accomplish, Jesus brought his sleepy disciples to the garden of Gethsemane in the last ditch effort in prayer, "Abba Father" he said, "all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36). Who knows? God may yet relent.

However, God the Father did not relent, rather he poured out all our inequities unto Christ. Most unexpectedly, by his death and resurrection, all our sins are forgiven and we are thus finally reconciled to God. Who would've known?

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**