

Followers' Folly

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Bloor Street United Church – 3rd after Epiphany

January 22, 2012

Sources: Mark 1.14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Jonah 3.1-10

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.' 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in

their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

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.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Having heard the beloved story of the call of the fishermen by the sea, and then shared a psalm of devotion, and listened to an anthem expressing the deep longing to follow Jesus, we turn now to a comedy of errors. In the book of Jonah, filled with ironies and absurdities, we see the various ways in which the life of a follower may derail.

Jonah is a Hebrew, the son of Amittai, which means trustworthy. But when he hears the call of God to go east to Nineveh, the capital of dreaded Assyria, he jumps instead into a boat headed for Tarshish in Spain, the farthest western point in the known world. His stated objective is to escape the presence of the Lord, as he calls God. We should note that the use of the term 'the Lord' rather than God in this setting establishes that Jonah knows the personal name of the true God, despite his wish to flee from his own knowledge. Biblical symbols of chaos abound as Jonah first finds himself in a terrifying storm at sea, and then inside the belly of a large fish.

But what an irony – in the midst of the storm, at first the sailors all cry to their own gods, but then Jonah owns up as the source of their bad luck and they question him. *Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? What is your country? Of what people are you?* Just the questions you would want your audience to ask if you were a good prophet, following God's call and seeking to spread the word of the Lord. When Jonah offers to make the storm abate by jumping into the sea, these erstwhile pagans earnestly plead with the God of Israel to spare them all. Reluctantly, they do throw him overboard amidst their prayers, and when the sea calms, they are stunned. They begin to worship, *'to revere the Lord even more'* we are told, to make sacrifices and vows – they are the perfect converts.

Jonah himself, the unwilling missionary, is then swallowed up by a whale – you might say, taken on an involuntary three day silent retreat. In the Old Testament lexicon, this monstrous sea creature, sometimes called the leviathan, is the ultimate image of turmoil and confusion, the very antithesis of the divine order. The sea and the sea creatures are considered horrifyingly dangerous, and Jonah himself refers to his position as being in the belly of death – the King James version calls it the belly of hell. The forces of chaos take him over completely until, as he says, *I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you in your holy temple*. His lament brings him back to his roots, and boom, chaos spits him out. He is walking on the dry land now, restored by God’s whisper to the fish.

Jonah now takes one breath, if that, and again, God is after him to go to Nineveh – the massive city of harsh rulers and sinful populace, following false gods, and oppressing their neighbours. Jonah walks hundreds of miles inland to complete his task, and we get the sense that he still isn’t convinced. He isn’t eloquent or particularly compelling in his oratory. ‘Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown,’ he says, only once. But look at the impact! They all believed God, even the king, who proclaimed a fast for the city and ordered that everyone, including the animals, should wear sackcloth, and turn from their evil ways. Indeed Jonah is so successful in his half-hearted mission work, that the city is spared.

So we might think that Jonah would take some satisfaction in this. He has responded to God’s call, even if it took a bit of pressure. He has completed the task given to him, with astounding effectiveness. And here is how he reacts. We read in the next verse, *But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry*. He says to God, This is why I didn’t want this task – because I knew you would just be merciful. I knew you were abounding in steadfast love. It turns out that Jonah is more attached to the pleasures of condemnation than to the work of steadfast love.

In an encounter that is all too human, we see that Jonah can muster more compassion for the small shrub that had shaded him than for all the men, women, and animals of the great city of Nineveh. Despite his miraculous past adventures and his massive success, we see him as a tired, grumpy curmudgeon, a bit of a spoilsport. He is not a hero, but a human being, being human – never a pretty sight.

There is something reassuring about this – it is in some way very familiar. In lectionary we heard about the day the Bank of Montreal announced that it would stop investing in South Africa. Among those who had put heart and soul into advocacy

and activism toward this goal, it was hard for some to be jubilant. Thoughts of scheming and devious tricks jumped to the fore. It can be difficult to lay down the mantle of the prophet, the one who, alone, has it right.

Good news too, that being swallowed up doesn't mean the end. We know that quite a lot of people spend a certain amount of time in the belly of the whale, so to speak – overcome by depression, or by the vicissitudes of life. *The waters closed in over me, the water surrounded me* – but that doesn't nullify the value of our lives, the possibility that great goodness will somehow grace us.

Or more generally, there is comfort in the thought that our own all too obvious humanity and limitations are not always an impediment to the good works that we are called to. Sometimes the church can make a big contribution despite itself! Especially now, given the odd situation of the church and the Christian religion as offside, offbeat with the larger society and out of tune with our own history. It is good news even as we wonder whether we are the greatest Christians, whether our devotion is sincere, our trustworthiness trustworthy. We probably aren't the greatest, the most trustworthy – yet even so our faith does become an element in the world. If you think of Jonah with the sailors, much less with the Ninevites, it is helpful to be reminded that it isn't all about our effectiveness and our attitude. We carry something that is greater than we are, more powerful and sweet, and it works in the world in ways that we must call mysterious.

We see that mystery at work by the seaside in Galilee, as Jesus calls to the fishermen in the story that Mary read. We know, because we have read to the end of the book, that these four men will find it hard to live up to the call, even though they follow willingly. The whole Gospel of Mark is about the way they don't get it. Some Biblical scholars believe that these first four men are really young – like the students of a rabbi, chosen at about age 16 or so. It gives us a very different mental picture of them, if we take off the beards and stern faces. Doesn't that change everything? It accounts for the enthusiasm, the breezy ways, the impetuous missteps. They don't wash their hands, they eat the wrong things. Remember when James and John bring their *mother* to ask Jesus to let them sit beside him in the kingdom? The same ones who left their father Zebedee standing in the boat. And the first thing they do as disciples is go to Simon's mother-in-law – his fiancée's mother let's say – and get Jesus to heal her so she can cook for them – they *are* like teenagers! As we watch the stories unfold from here through Epiphany and Lent, we can picture them as young people.

Our call to follow is like Jonah's and Simon's and Andrew's, and James' and John's – it is a call not to heroism, but to folly and foible. It is a call into new possibilities and new worlds, a future undefined, but trustworthy. And for this we thank God.

Amen.