

Epiphany 3 Year B – January 24, 2021
Jonah 3:1-5,10; Mark 1:14-20
Epiphany, Winnipeg
Paul Sartison, 2021

Jonah. Everybody knows about Jonah. Swallowed by a whale, or like the story actually says, swallowed by a great big fish. But there's more to the story – four chapters, and I'll give it to you in one and a half minutes:

God calls Jonah to go “over there”, to walk east for days to get to the great city of Nineveh, and God says, “tell all those people in that city to turn around, to change their mind, to turn away from their violence and their cruelty.” So Jonah looks east, then Jonah turns west; buys a ticket on a ship that will sail west, to the end of the known world...to get far away from God...far away from those people. The ship runs into a storm, and Jonah says that God is causing the storm because Jonah is fleeing from God, so the crew throw Jonah off the ship, and the storm ends, and then Jonah is swallowed by that great big fish.

After three days God tells the fish to bring up Jonah back on the shore he had left, so the the fish turns around, heads east and puts Jonah on the shore. This time Jonah goes to the great city and says to the people, “Turn around, change your ways, or in forty days you'll be wiped out...by God.” And the king says to the people, “Turn around,” so the people and the animals all change their ways because the king said so, and they dress in burlap and sit in piles of ashes to show their weakness and humility and repentance. Then God turns around and says “I changed my mind and I will not destroy them. They'll be OK.” Then Jonah is mad, because God has been good. And he turns again, and sits on a hillside to pout, and God says, “Shouldn't I care about all these people? And all these cattle?”

It's an old old story but it's our story. Because sometimes we are called and we're reluctant to go; sometimes we might want God to be angry with those people

because we know they're no good, just like Jonah saw no good in the people of Nineveh – they're a lost cause. It's our story because sometimes we might find ourselves in the belly of a great big fish, sunk deep in resentment or jealousy or vengeance. Thankfully, it's our story too because the God who is woven throughout is a God who stubbornly insists that there is no such thing as a lost cause. You're not a lost cause, I'm not, we're not; there is no people, no community, no nation, no earth, no creation, that is a lost cause. God cares for it all, and God is opening our eyes to see the world around us the same way. To live in the world around us the same way.

We heard another story today – this story of four fishers. Their names are Simon and Andrew and James and John, and we don't know much about them up to now. Old? Young? Who knows? But Jesus calls these four, and they turn away from their fishing so that they can follow this unknown new teacher who says that they will fish for people now: they will gather people into a new community, they will live among the people, and they will live for the people around them. They're leaving what they know to follow someone new, to where? They don't know. To riches? To poverty? To those who are sick or alone? To glory? To a cross?

That's our story too. We are called...to what? We just don't know where we'll end up. But we are called to fish for people, to bring people in and to bring people together....into a community of fish...of people. We are called to fish for people, and we ourselves are fish, and we live among the rest of the fish, the rest of the people, even when we are alone. We are called to fish for people, to turn away from living and working just for ourselves, to turn toward the people around us, to do our living and working for the good of the world around us, to fish, to

work...for people.

These stories we hear in Scripture....all of them....these are our stories. We've heard them and shared them in our life together, just like so many hear them and share them everywhere right now, and just like so many have heard them and shared them for thousands of years, just like they will be spoken and heard for all the years to come.

Our gathering together today – yes, together even when apart – is just another chapter of that same story. It's a chapter with something new for us here, this online communion. Here and all over there are some who are still not comfortable with it and that's OK. There are some churches and people who have been doing this every week since last March some time, and that's OK. Because it's all the story of the same people....

We celebrate this communion in all these places, wherever we are, together. This isn't a real communion because of something I do here that makes Christ be present out there. This is our communion together, where we share the real presence of Christ, because Christ is already there, in your place, in that space, in the bread and the wine that you may have gathered together. And we eat and drink the Body of Christ with the whole Body of Christ, wherever the Body of Christ, the people, gathers. In the same space. Within the same walls. In the same field or parking lot. In the same world where the Spirit calls and gathers and enlightens us, along with people everywhere who celebrate now.

We celebrate this meal in these times, right here, with the whole church in every time. We celebrate now with the all the people the Spirit has called and gathered together over all these years. With the first people who told heard this story about a reluctant prophet who spent three days in the belly of a fish. We

celebrate with four fishers who were called away from their fishing jobs to go and fish for people instead.... We celebrate this meal with twelve apostles who share one last meal with Jesus, and we celebrate with all the people who have heard of Jesus rising on the third day, after his own time in the belly of a tomb. We feast on the real presence of Jesus today, along with people who live on the street or who pick up a bag lunch from the Urban on a cold afternoon, where Christ is truly present. We share this meal with a young black woman draped in yellow who speaks poetry of profound hope at a president and vice-president's inauguration. Christ was present there too.

It's Christ's meal, given for us all. It's a meal we share with everyone now, with those who are long gone, and with all of those yet to come. When we're done eating and the plates are cleared away we push away from the table, stand up satisfied, and turn around to find that we're in this world, this place God cares for so deeply and so always, where we see Christ present and we be Christ's presence. In this world so loved...as this story goes on. AMEN.