

Sermon: Epiphany 3

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Year B
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Psalm 62:6-14
Mark 1:14-20

One Saturday evening... when I was nineteen or twenty... I went with some friends to a night club... the entertainment that night was a hypnotist... and my friends encouraged me to volunteer... apparently... I was a good subject... because I went under quickly... and I was asked to describe to the audience of about one hundred... how babies were made... in Chinese... and there was no hesitation in me... there was no part of me that thought... *I don't know Chinese*... I just did it... gladly... eagerly... with no thought of whether what came out of my mouth was actually Chinese... though I doubt it was... but I was put into a suggestive state... a trance... as they say...

There's a movie... it's a story about a successful... wealthy man... who lives his adult life... in a kind of trance... obsessed with his success... disconnected from business partners... co-workers... employees... and family... he lives in a kind of emotional isolation booth... self-absorbed and alone... but his brother... his loving brother... plans an elaborate... complex intervention... that takes days... a series of events... intended to bring the man back to himself... to restore the connection he once had with others... to wake him up from the trance he's been in...

In his book The Family... therapist John Bradshaw describes the family system... as a different kind of trance... he writes... *actually... trance is a naturally occurring state... we daydream... we get absorbed in future fantasies... we relive old memories from the past... we go to movies... watch television... read novels... all of these affect a state of trance... but the family trance... he wrote... is created by both parents' individual interactions with the children... and by the marriage itself... for example... mom may nag at dad because he won't talk... when dad is asked why he won't talk... he says its because mom nags... so mom nags because dad won't talk... and the children eat...*

breathe... and are formed out of this action... the whole then... is the trance in which all of the parts participate... but Bradshaw is quick to add... that because everyone in the family system is responsible... there is no one to blame... the dysfunction comes out of inadequate rules or belief systems... which result in frozen feedback loops and circularity... one individual may behave in a dysfunctional manner... but it is the whole family... which is dis-eased...

When my daughter was about four years old... I had a "come to Jesus" talk with her grandmother... my former wife's mom... she had been raised in an abusive household... and she constantly shamed and invalidated Rachel's thoughts and feelings... she may have been jealous that we interacted with Rachel in such a healthy way... she may have felt guilty that she didn't treat her own daughter as well... but either way... I had had enough... in fact... one evening... the two of us were walking out the door at the same time... leaving my former wife and daughter alone... I was going to the grocery store... and she was going to visit friends... I said... *Mom... let's lock the door... and she said... Oh... anyone comes and takes Jean... pretty soon they'll see what they've got and they'll bring her right back...* I was horrified... that my mother-in-law would say such a thing about her own daughter... she had not yet woken up from her family's trance...

For the original readers of the Book of Jonah... it was a well-known fact that the Assyrian city of Nineveh had long-ago been completely destroyed... and was never rebuilt... but in the afternoon service of Yom Kippur... the Day of Atonement... Jonah is still read in synagogue... because of the theme of repentance... because of the recognition... that we all need to repent...

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney... Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School... wrote... *God is moved to rewrite her own rules on behalf of the Assyrians... who conquered God's own people... and whose brutality and viciousness were legendary... the Assyrians preserved detailed images of themselves torturing their*

captives in various ways... see me if you want the gory details... I would just add that what they did... makes waterboarding seem like a day at the spa... but God is moved to rewrite her own rules on their behalf... even though they did not worship Israel's God... so although it may seem that Jonah was an effective prophet... it may also be easier to understand why he was so put out with God... for forgiving them...

You see... Deuteronomy 18:22 talks about prophets... it says... *if a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord... but the thing does not take place or prove true... it is a word that the Lord has not spoken...* Jeremiah 28:9 says... that although a prophecy of peace must be fulfilled in order to prove that its deliverer is a true prophet... a prophecy of destruction... is intended from the outset... to educate and bring repentance... so one can be a true prophet... even when one's prediction does not come true...

But as Ismael Ruiz-Millán... the director of the Hispanic House of Studies at Duke Divinity School... writes... the cost of prophetic ministry is high... *now that John is in jail... the prophetic ministry is passed on to Jesus... we see Jesus' prophetic ministry when he goes to unpopular places and people... we see him becoming less popular as he moves forward in his mission to declare the Good News... prophetic ministry is not about being the most popular... it's about being willing to become unpopular... those who prepare the way for Jesus will suffer... be persecuted...and maybe even be killed... and while most of us will not literally be killed... our pride... our reputation... our status... and our dreams might be destroyed... for the sake of proclaiming the Good News...*

Ismael continues... *our world today is not so different from the world Jesus addressed in Galilee... we still have dysfunctional systems... including religious systems.... we still live with an overwhelming and tragic chasm between rich and poor... oppressive powers still allow the exploitation of children's bodies... black bodies... and female bodies... we need to repent for these sins... and to believe that alternatives to such*

tragic realities exist... like the fishermen... we need to follow Jesus... letting go of whatever makes us keep allowing the dehumanization of God's people...

A group called ELCA Advocacy issued an Action Alert yesterday *via* email regarding this oppression... they wrote... *in the wake of the current impasse that has caused a shutdown of the federal government... the ELCA calls on Congress and the Administration to do their jobs... by passing and enacting legislation that resolves critical issues... failing to fund our government... re-authorize the Children's Health Insurance Program... and find a permanent solution for Dreamers who are losing their protections... affects the lives of Americans in every community across this land... and the posturing on both sides of the aisle is inexcusable... as Lutherans... we believe that God works through the family... the economy... the government... and other structures necessary for life in the present age.... and while we respect the integrity of governing authorities... we also hold them accountable to God... we must leave no one behind... these words come with a sense of urgency...*

The ancient Greeks had two words for time... *chronos* and *kairos*... *chronos* refers to clock time... time that can be measured... in minutes... hours... weeks... years... and from it we get words like chronological... but while *chronos* is quantitative... *kairos* is qualitative... it doesn't measure seconds... but moments... the right moment... an opportune moment... the world takes a breath... and in the pause before it exhales... fates can be changed...

And in today's Gospel... Jesus says... *the time is fulfilled... and the kingdom of God has come near*... and the Greek word that's used for time... is *kairos*... God's time... the perfect moment to repent... to believe the Good News... for Mark... there is no Mary... no Joseph... there are no Kings... it's all about the Incarnation... about God's breaking in to *chronos*... about things happening immediately... perhaps with a sense of urgency...

We are called to have the faith of Jesus... but too many only have faith in him... we are called to follow Jesus... but too many only worship him... we are called to step out onto the water... but too many stay with their boats... stay with the way things have always been... choose not to challenge the *status quo*... we are called to mean it when we say... *Thy will be done*... we are called to wake up from the collective trance that we're in... in our families... communities... and politics... to break the frozen feedback loops we're in... and become fully functional... to come and see... to fish for people... and if the Ninevites can repent and be forgiven... can turn back to God and be forgiven... then with God's help... so can we...

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