

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany 3-B (24 January 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2021-01-23 Sat 17:11>*

## **Collect**

*Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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

## **1 Laugh Out Loud**

Sometimes, when the world seems dark, the thing we need the most is some reason to laugh out loud. While sometimes laughter can be dark, cynical, or hurtful, I'm talking about a different kind of laughter. I'm talking about the laughter we see in young children: laughter that is light, cheerful, and surprising.

When I was growing up, I loved reading *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. It made me laugh with joy and surprise. This book and its companions were hilariously absurd, suggesting that the most important tool needed for space travel is a bath towel, the worst torture in the world is to listen to Vogon poetry, and that people can instantly learn to understand each other by putting a fish in their ear – a special fish called a babel fish, named after the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible.

Our first reading this week seeks to give us a 2-minute summary of the book of Jonah, which is a book of the Bible fully as absurd as the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Sometimes we may approach our scriptures a little too seriously and fail to notice the genius of comedy embedded in them! The tale of Jonah was told by our forebears in the faith, a tale full of absurdity so surprising it caused its listeners, children and adults alike to laugh out loud! Can't you just hear the little children asking to hear this brief story again and again? When we think of the story of Jonah, we think of the big fish that swallowed up Jonah and kept him alive at the bottom of the sea for three days. But that isn't even the most ridiculous part of the story! The fish was just the warm-up act for what came next!

## **2 Nineveh I**

You may remember God called Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh. That was the ridiculous premise for the story. Nineveh! Nineveh was the imperial capital of the world. It was a city so big, so powerful, so corrupt, so renowned for its cruelty that no one would be surprised at Jonah's response. Nineveh was the worst place on earth, hell come to life. Its people were evil, deceptive, violent, and not to be trusted for a second. They worshiped their king who dressed up in ridiculous costumes and waged cruel wars, victimizing whoever got in his way or looked at him wrong. No sane person would want to go to Nineveh. Especially not a pious person of faith like Jonah. Jonah heard God speaking, but what God was saying just didn't make sense! Jonah rightly questioned his own sanity, his own powers of discernment. And Jonah headed the other way.

It took a storm and a big fish to get Jonah on track, to convince him that he hadn't misunderstood, that God was serious about this task. So Jonah went to Nineveh. And Jonah preached the worst sermon in the history or preaching. "In 40 days, you die." Five words in Hebrew. No invitation, no pleading, no proclamation of God's love. Jonah knew it was useless to even try. He was just doing what he was told, and good riddance to these out-of-control fanatics.

### 3 Plot twist

And here's the part that would turn the head of every Israelite hearing the tale of Jonah, the plot twist that would make their jaws drop and cause them to demand of the story teller, "What's that? Can you say that again, please?"

Nineveh repented. Nineveh repented *hard*. Nineveh repented so hard and so universally, even their cows repented. Please don't bring your pets or your livestock to Ash Wednesday this year, but that's what happened in Nineveh! So the children laughed at the thought of barnyard animals attending liturgy, the adults howled at the thought of those evil people ever changing, and the prophet told a story of what? Of absurdity?

Maybe.

Maybe sometimes "absurdity" is the only word that we can find to try to describe God's love for humankind. God's love busts open every adjective, far out-performs every verb, utterly eclipses every metaphor, until all we're left with is absurdity and laughter. God's love is so strong, so wide, and so powerful, that the things it does will make us turn our heads in shock, jaws dropping open wide, and laughter bubbling forth because it *doesn't even make sense!*

### 4 Nineveh II

Speaking of things that don't make sense... This past year has been hard. My friends, we have been dwelling in Nineveh. The Covid-19 virus has ravaged the globe, killing family, friends and strangers alike. 400,000 people have died in the United States alone, and we are a long way from done. Partisanship has ravaged our nation with words and acts of violence, sowing division in our families, businesses, friend groups, and even our churches! White supremacy has reared its head and created a lot more division than just between black and white. Darkly fanciful stories like QAnon and baseless claims of election fraud have inflamed tempers and turned off the last possibility of listening to one another.

All of this can leave us feeling helpless, hopeless, disconnected, and lost. We are dwelling in Nineveh. Doctors can't give us a vaccine for contempt. Governments can't change our hearts. Parties don't unite us with all God's children.

So instead of putting our hope in these lesser things, the church invites us to remember Jonah. Jonah knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no hope for Nineveh. "In 40 days, you die," is the best he could offer them. And that is exactly when God did something different, something so amazing, unbelievable and powerful that Jonah could only sulk while the children laughed and the adults clapped with delight.

## 5 Laughter

That's the message of the Gospel, the message encapsulated in our baptismal covenant. When evil, lies, and conspiracy theories invade our neighborhoods, we will persevere in resisting evil. Sometimes we'll get taken in for a moment, but then we will repent and return to the Lord. We will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God's love in Christ. We will seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We will strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being.

What an absurd set of promises to make. Almost as absurd as the love of God which they are intended to reflect. Almost as amazing as the love of God with which those promises are intended to make us complicit. Almost as active as the agency of God which changes the world in amazing, even bizarre ways. God is going to do something so amazing that it will seem absurd and bring involuntary shouts of laughter from everyone who sees. And if we allow it, God wants to do that something through us!

The story of Jonah is a story of hope and laughter. Even in the very worst the world has to offer, God is not done and God's purposes will not be thwarted. How will our nation find healing? How will our world achieve peace? How will our communities effect justice and equality? How will our families be knit back together? Jonah didn't know it, but God was already at work in Nineveh. God is at work around us. Our job as Christians, inheritors of those apostles Jesus called from their fishing nets and fishy stories, is to **look** beyond our conventional expectations, to **respond** in faith to God's outrageous invitation in each of *our* lives, and to be **open** to the head turning, jaw-dropping, laughter-inducing activity of God in the world around us. **Amen.**