

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 25, 2015

**"SHORT AND SWEET"**

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 ~ Mark 1:14-20

This past week we remembered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as we recognized his vast contributions to our country and to the world. I remembered him as the leader of the civil rights movement from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. I remembered that his leadership was fundamental to that movement's success in ending the legal segregation of African Americans in the South, and other parts of the United States. I remembered that he promoted nonviolent tactics, such as the massive March on Washington in 1963, to secure civil rights. I remembered that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. I remembered him as a great orator who inspired throngs of followers with his "I Have a Dream" speech. But what I did not remember was that long before all of this he was a Baptist preacher. I was able to find some of his early sermons at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama and I'm here to tell you that that man could preach!

I don't get to hear great preaching as often as I'd like. You might be sitting there thinking the same thing. I studied homiletics in seminary and I have read many brilliant sermons but I have never heard preaching greater than the two sermons in our scripture today. Jonah, the reluctant prophet, stands up in Nineveh and says: *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* (Jonah 3:4). Though I'm not so sure he shouts it. No, he probably mumbles it, in barely audible tones so people have to lean in to hear what he says. "What? What's that you say, old timer? Forty days more and what?" You see, Jonah doesn't want those nasty old Ninevites to get right with God. Fine with him if God clobbers them after the way they've treated the Israelites over the years. *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* But you heard what happened ... all of them ... from the poorest pauper to the almighty King ... rose up and fell down before God in repentance. Now that's preaching!

The carpenter's son walks along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and proclaims *"The time is fulfilled, and the dominion of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news"* (Mark 1:15). Such a simple sermon, but it says it all. It includes the urgency of the moment - *"The time has come!"* It opens their eyes to what is happening: *"God's rule is upon us."* It reminds them of what we all know, that we aren't ready to meet the ruling God. *"Repent."* That's the bad news they're expecting. But then comes the irony ... the power ... the surprising twist of the artful sermon. *"The rule of God is good news you can trust; give yourself to it."* Jesus comes across Simon and Andrew, James and John ... salty, crusty sailors working with their nets and says, *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."* Talk about hitting the nail on the head. It's in serving Christ that we discover who we really are. It's in following Christ that we blossom into our best selves and share the gifts that God wants to give through us to the world. Calling is

salvation. Salvation is calling. And Jesus says it all in just two words. "Follow me!" And immediately - immediately! Mark says - they leave their nets and follow him.

I wish I could preach like that. You probably wish I could, too ... short and sweet. A word ... a phrase ... no more than a sentence, and then, we pray, we sing, we collect the offering and we're out of here in time to beat the crowds to the restaurant. I know people like short sermons. I've never had anyone tell me, "Mary Anne, you quit too soon today. I wanted to hear more." Well, you'll just have to forgive me because I don't have the gift. I can't get what I'm burning to say condensed into one mighty word. I have to throw a lot of words together in the pot and add a few to those ... stir in some adjectives and slice up a story or two ... hoping the word of God is somewhere in the stew that I serve you every Sunday. But Jonah and Jesus just need five seconds of our time to feed us what we need.

I want to learn their secret, but for the life of me I can't quite get my head around what makes these two sermons so powerful. I still have several books on homiletics. But these guys don't follow any of the standard guidelines for great preaching. I don't think Jonah or Jesus read those books. But what is it about their sermons that made them so great?

Maybe they said more at the time, and what the scripture writers remembered was a catchphrase or a central theme of a longer message. Last Monday you couldn't turn on the news without hearing Dr. King's magnificent voice saying, "I have a dream." Over and over we heard a snippet of that masterpiece, but it was a longer sermon that Dr. King shared on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1963. He spelled out what the dream was that day and in many other sermons across his life time. It was a beautiful dream ... it was God's dream that people of all races and all nations and all classes and all kinds might live together in peace and share the prosperity of the land. What's more, we hear the "I have a Dream" speech every year at this time, but then we go a whole year without hearing *about* the dream ... let alone working to bring that dream to reality. And what good is a sermon if it stirs our hearts but makes no difference at all in the way we behave and put our world together? We can say that we love Dr. King's sermon but what are we doing to make God's dream come true? I tell you, our own dreams can never come true as long as poor children and people of color in this land are still living a nightmare!

Or maybe something else was happening in addition to the sermons that Jonah and Jesus preached ... something the scripture writers left out. Preaching happens in context, you know. A particular time ... a particular place ... what the Biblical scholars call the *Sitz im Leben* or "situation in life." We have to understand these sermons in their social setting and in the context of a particular historical moment. We need to know what else was happening ... what social forces gave these sermons such power? What's more, the word of God comes to us in many ways ... as a word of comfort ... a word of challenge ... a word of calling ... always inviting us to step out of our familiar safety zones to risk something new and claim something beautiful that God has waiting for us.

Did you know that I used to be a televangelist? Well, sort of. The church in Nekoosa televised our services for several years and they were shown on the local cable station. We discontinued broadcasting after about 4 years and while I was grocery shopping one day a woman I didn't know stopped to ask me why our services were no longer televised. She said that she and her mother used to watch faithfully each week just to hear me preach. I thought, well, that makes

two of you! Of course I was flattered ... but when I told her that we are *live and in person* each Sunday morning at 9:30 she hemmed and hawed and said that she didn't much like coming to church. I wanted her to know how much she was missing by not listening to God's other voices. Many a Sunday God has spoken to me so profoundly through our liturgist's scripture reading ... through our kid's responses during the children's message ... through the choir's praise and beauty of our organist's prelude ... through the testimony of a church member, or the sight of a long-serving usher shaking a newcomer's hand in the name of Christ. Television is convenient but it can't really replace what you are missing if you're not here *live and in person*. So perhaps the power of these two short sermons is in the context, how they summed up all the different words in all the different ways God had been speaking to the Ninevites or the Galileans in their day.

Or, I wonder if the way had been prepared ... if the hard ground of their souls had been broken up and plowed for planting by their own conversations in the days just before Jonah or Jesus preached. I've been told that good preaching is just saying what people already know is true and want to be told so they can be freed to do it. I know good preaching expresses the essence of a good community. Maybe the Ninevites had been talking with each other about how things weren't right in their city. ... that too many people were having a hard time of it ... that they weren't treating each other with respect ... that their romance with violence had turned back on them. Maybe they were wondering what they might need to do... how they might need to change. Maybe Peter and Andrew, James and John had sat by the fire the night before studying scripture ... talking about the Messiah and what they needed to do to please God. Maybe they had come to the point in their lives together that their fear of changing and risking and following God's way was not nearly so great as their fear of things staying just the same day after day after decade. There had to be a better way. There had to be a better world. And what could hold them back once they realized the prize of the journey was so much better than the price of standing still?

All they needed was the word. As James Gillis says, "Good preaching sounds reveille, not taps." It awakens us to the urgency of the moment and the movement of God's Spirit among us. Preaching doesn't happen in a vacuum. It both addresses and expresses what God is already doing among a people. The power of a great sermon, like the sermon Jonah preached, like the sermons Jesus preached, is not in the art of writing or the style of delivery. Art and style have their place. But the measurement of a great sermon is not a matter of craft. It's not how it makes you feel, or the great ideas it inspires, although it might involve the heart and head. But the measurement of a great sermon is in the feet and the hands ... the pocketbook and the wristwatch of the listeners. It's in what the hearers drop and what they pick up ... where they go and what they say when they get there ... that distinguishes a great sermon from just pretty good preaching.

So maybe the reason I can't preach great short sermons isn't just my fault ... maybe we all bear some responsibility, too. Maybe it takes us longer to hear what God is saying than it took the Ninevites or the Galileans. Maybe we aren't as hungry for it or as prepared to respond. Maybe we don't want to hear God tell us "Go to Nineveh and warn them where they're headed," or hear Christ command, "Follow me," because like most folks, we would prefer to serve God in a purely advisory capacity. And, what's the urgency? Despite our troubled economy we are still one of the most prosperous nations in all of history. But look at the needs around us, and who's

being left out. Listen to what our leaders aren't saying, and the epidemic of racism and classism and sexism and heterosexism, the plague of violence, the scourge of materialism. Isn't it an urgent time? As Paul says, "the present form of the world is passing away." "Passing away." That's our euphemism for dying, isn't it? And where is the good news? Where is life to be found after all ... life that is real ... life that lasts? What is God telling you ... calling you to? What does a good God want to give you ... and give to the world through you? And what in the world is holding you back from dropping your nets ... letting go of your idols ... forgetting your fears, and just following Jesus?

That's really my sermon today. Short and sweet. That's it:

Follow Jesus!

Follow Jesus!

Follow Jesus!

The Word of God for the people of God; thanks be to God!

May we pray?

Open our eyes to see you.

Open our ears to hear you.

Open our hearts to love you.

Open our minds to know you.

Open our arms to embrace you, dear Lord.

But most of all we pray,

Set our feet to following you!

In the name of Christ, Amen.