

Jonah 5: 1-5, Mark 1: 14-20 Relentless Mercy

Now that we are in the latter half of January 2024, I'm feeling somewhat relieved that I don't have to begin my interaction with people with a "Happy New Year," because this year, I found myself hesitating ever so slightly before I utter the word "Happy" before New Year. It's not because I don't sincerely wish it for everyone, but because I have a hunch that somehow this year will not be simply a happy year.

The truth is, every year brings its own challenges, and joys, not to forget, and so does this year. It is a gift to be part of this caring community that comes together in times of joy and celebration as well as sorrow. We pray for one another, sharing our joys and concerns, lifting them up to God's care. We reach out, stay in touch, serve, give thanks and celebrate together throughout the year. It makes me happy and helps me feel grounded in faith, despite personal challenges.

Then there's the world beyond these church walls, teeming with violence and divisiveness that seem out of proportion and out of control, and our hearts break to witness the devastating loss of lives and the ravaging of lands, within and beyond our borders... And then there's the uncertainty of how we as a nation will choose our path forward this year. This is why proclaiming Happy New Year has been difficult for me.

And yet, that is precisely what Jesus did, coming into the world that was just as violent, broken and hurting as ours today, if not more, proclaiming the good news of God, and he calls to us, "follow me." Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 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.

You may have heard that the word Gospel means "good news." What's more, a pastor colleague who researched the word study told me that traditionally these Greek words referred to victory in war. "The messenger would run back from the front lines and shout, 'We've won!' That was good news for the king."¹

¹ Rev. Judith Cuthbertson, 2024 01 17 Lectionary study group.

So, Jesus came proclaiming the victory of the kingdom of God. If you think that the corrupt and evil power of the kingdom of this world has an upper hand, you are mistaken. So, repent, that is, change your mind, and believe in the good news that God has prevailed. That's a cause for shouting Happy New Year.

And here is the thing, the war God has won is not against this nation or that; what God defeated is not this group of people or that, although nations and tribes fighting wars and those taking sides would like to think God is on their side.

No, this good news of God's victory is even better, because it is God's victory over the power of evil and hatred itself, in every nation, on every land, and in every human heart, including yours and mine, even in the hearts of those who seem to be way beyond hope for salvation; especially there, God's victory over evil would be powerful.

Apparently, the world has not yet gotten this message, this good news, or else we're defying it, for we continue to live as if the violence, oppression, destruction and divisiveness are the way to go.

O Lord, have mercy on us; and the Lord does. From the moment the wholeness of God's peaceable kingdom, the shalom of God, was broken and misery entered our world, God in God's relentless mercy, has been sending prophets to reach us with the good news, calling us to repent, turn around and walk in the light of God.

And God has had to work with prophets who generally, at least initially, didn't believe they were up to the task, even those big-name prophets like Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos. In the case of Jonah, ha! he was outright noncompliant. But if we asked ourselves if we were a prophet material, we'd be more like Jonah. For Jonah's trouble was he had his opinion when it came to who deserved God's mercy and who didn't, and he disagreed with God there.

The part of the story you perhaps recall when you think of Jonah happened before the part Leah read for us: the first time when God called and told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah turned around and went the opposite direction, got on a boat, was thrown into the stormy sea, got swallowed by the fish, and that part of the story ended with the fish spitting Jonah out on the dry land.

Then, as Leah read to us, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: the same Lord, the same word, the same purpose. A do over. God trusted Jonah again with a divine commission to "arise, go and proclaim to the city," Nineveh the message. Now, Nineveh was

the capital of Assyria, the empire that ransacked the northern Kingdom of Israel. No wonder Jonah didn't want to go there or care about its fate; why would HIS God care?

By the time the Book of Jonah was written, Israel had endured so much at the hands of enemies that there was little desire to keep alive the vision of Israel as God's missionary to reach the whole world with God's saving truth. Jonah as a character in this story is a prophet but also the Israelites who had grown weary of their enemies. Israelites would do what Jonah did, and that was to refuse to bring God's message that might cause the evil city of Nineveh to repent and be spared, which is exactly what happens in the story. The very people we despise are the ones God wants to reconcile through God's relentless mercy. God's call is persistent; God does not give up.

So, having learned that it's useless to try to resist God's call, Jonah got up and went, but only begrudgingly. He's still not happy God bothers to reach out to his enemy, so his obedience is only a temporary forced compliance. God can and would work with that.

Jonah proclaimed to the city its imminent destruction. The world that is clueless of its evil acts would self-destruct; it brings judgment of calamity upon itself. But unexpectedly, this pagan city repents and express a wholesale remorse. God *was* going to let Nineveh meet its sorry end, but God "changed God's mind" and delivered Nineveh from itself. God relented this unmerciful outcome and chose God's relentless mercy. God is God of deliverance, even toward the rebellious children. God's mercy knows no bounds. How can *we* lose hope for the Nineveh's of our world in our days. God is faithful still and calls us to proclaim the good news.

Jonah, with all his cluelessness and deficiencies, was a prophet, whom God relentlessly pursued to serve in God's redemptive plan. Now, John the Baptist, who came after all the Hebrew prophets, had said, "someone who is greater than me is *coming after* me," and Jesus came into Galilee. Then, when Jesus told his disciples to "follow me," it literally meant "*come after* me." Through the words of the Scriptures and the still small voice of the Spirit, that call has been heard by generations of disciples who *came after* them.

Today's passage from Mark begins with "After the John the Baptist was arrested," Jesus came into Galilee. "Arrested" here is the same word used when Jesus was later arrested, to be handed over and delivered up to the Roman authority. After Jesus was arrested, it was his disciples' turn to take up Jesus' proclamation of the gospel of God, the good news of God's

victory of the power of evil in the world. And that community of the fishers of people has continued to this very day, sustained by God's relentless mercy for our world.

If Nineveh was a pagan city, Galilee in Jesus's time was called the District of the Gentiles. The city Jonah resisted to bring God's message to repented of their evil ways. Jesus began his ministry in the land of Gentiles, the non-Jews. Today, we complain and decry how our world is turning so secular, but Jesus, too, was sent into the world who did not know him; in fact, God sent him there. God's mercy is relentless and would not be bound by the boundaries of all kinds that humans draw.

Mark doesn't tell us much about the disciples other than what's essential: It was Jesus who came to them, passing along the Sea of Galilee where they lived; Jesus called to them to follow him; Jesus told them he will turn them into fishers of people. It's all Jesus's initiative. All this the disciples heard, and they followed Jesus immediately. Jesus's call reached directly to the hearts of the disciples and compelled them to trust Jesus and follow.

The expression "fish for people" was usually used the negative sense, like catching people with a snare. But when Jesus says, "fish for people," it is to bring people into the kingdom of God. His disciples are not called to save the world on our own heroic performance, but to follow Jesus who is charged with empowering us to do our part.

Just because we've responded to God's call to doesn't mean we would always know what our part in God's plan is. We might experience what Jonah experienced, as our human sense of justice comes up against God's relentless mercy. But we don't follow Christ alone; we are a band of brothers and sisters following him together; we are all caught in the same net Jesus has cast. As a community, as those who came after, we follow God's vision of relentless mercy that reconciles those who seem irreconcilable to us.

What does proclaiming the good news of the victory of this relentlessly merciful God look like today, as a person of faith, a local church here in the valley, as a member congregation that belongs to the denominational body of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that values our connectivity as one body united in Christ?

Becoming a disciple takes both a moment of the turning and the lifetime of following, with a growing understanding of what it means to follow Christ at any given moment in our lives. We may find ourselves clueless as to what is ours to do, but God in God's relentless mercy, can and will use us now as God has done all these years past. If the time was fulfilled

when Jesus said so, and the kingdom of God was near when Jesus said so, our time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is ever near now. Let us be on our way. Amen