

*“The Joke is On Us”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 22, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: Jonah 3: 1-10    Mark 1: 14-20

## **Jonah 3**

### *Conversion of Nineveh*

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste

anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup> Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

## **Mark 1**

### *The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry*

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**”

### *Jesus Calls the First Disciples*

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to them, “**Follow me and I will make you fish for people.**” <sup>18</sup> And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup> As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup> Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the

hired men, and followed him.

If God invited you to do something great,  
something mighty, tremendous, fabulous, even,  
would you do it?

How about if God invited you to do a small thing,  
something seemingly insignificant to you  
yet meaningful to someone else?  
Would you?

Our own beloved Fred Craddock shared that as a child  
he had fantasies of being martyred in some great  
cause  
and then being remembered as a great  
Christian.

Years later he came to the spiritual conclusion

that most of us are called and invited by God

to touch lives in small ways, in the everyday.

Rather than our lives being one big check,

over the course of the practice of our faith we write many, many small checks.

In the midst of common, every day encounters and opportunities,

God compellingly invites you to serve, even as Christ first served us.

In both passages today, from Jonah and Mark,

everyday people of God are invited to serve.

Jonah, Simon, Andrew, and Zebedee have to make a decision

whether they will make the adjustments necessary to respond.

Some folks say yes, some stay behind;

some take off, and some become ambassadors for Christ.

Some may want to be and do great things,

but honestly, friends, the invitation to serve is humbling.

To God goes the glory, not to the servant.

We may pray and offer ourselves to God to be used for a  
mighty cause and call,

and God smiles,

nods at the good joke,

appreciates the humor here,

and then presents for our living pleasure

small tasks that lead to small victories

which in due time bring us one step  
closer

to building the domain of God on  
earth as it is in heaven.

Last Tuesday evening

eleven Disciples of Christ ranging from high school  
student to elder

squeezed around a table meant for 8,

sitting in a tight circle, shoulder to  
shoulder for an hour

so that we could see one another and hear each other

and work together to discern whether our  
church and city

should, could, and would aspire and conspire

to start and sustain a thrift store.

We asked good questions,  
and made long lists of challenges  
and brainstormed what is the main thing.

In the midst of our discussion

Millie Suttles pointed out that a thrift store  
would allow for the “repurposing of products.”

We smiled at the turn of phrase,

for our church is currently going green,  
and we are all about reducing, reusing, and  
recycling.

After listening to Millie identify the repurposing of products  
as a possible goal for the thrift store,

someone said that sounds a lot like our  
church’s mission,

to repurpose souls.

Thanks be to God,

Jesus Christ is all about the repurposing of lives.

There is a wonderful little word

we find sprinkled throughout the Bible

that speaks to the repurposing of lives,

the repurposing of individuals, families

and communities

and even entire nations.

Repent.

Listen as Jesus compellingly invites us to live into it:

*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.”*

In Jonah 3: 10 we read:

*“When God saw what the [people of Ninevah] did,*

*how they turned from their evil way,*

*God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them;*

*and [God] did not do it.”*

Repent.

Repent, and believe.

Repent, and believe in the Good News.

To repent is to turn away from all that separates you from God and one another,

and to turn toward the love and grace of God.

To repent is to turn toward God,

acknowledging with every fiber of your being that  
wherever God goes, you follow.

To repent is to repurpose your life,

yoking God's greatest gifts to humanity: re-creation  
and faith.

The funny thing is, my friends,

the area where we often get tripped up  
and find God chuckling at our efforts

is that we imagine

we have to be soooo amazing and do something  
great.

God must be enjoying the joke,

because you already are amazing.

You are exceptional.

You are beautiful, brilliant, bold creations of grace.

What we might need to get serious about

is making the small adjustments necessary,

the small degrees of change necessary

as we become open to God's invitation



to be re-created, repurposed, and  
reused.

The Bible speaks to us of Jonah,

of one whom God asked to extend to his enemies

a short, pithy word of invitation.

The lives of those who received the invitation were never the  
same.

But what about the deliverer of the Good News?

Was the joke on him, or did he get it and grow through it?

Jonah's name means "dove" -- which is also the symbol for  
Israel.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh

and to proclaim God's judgment against them.

The people of Nineveh had been beating up the Israelites for  
a long time,

and Jonah wasn't too keen about going into enemy  
territory,

especially enemies he thought didn't deserve  
God's grace and mercy.

So Jonah went in the opposite direction by ship, toward  
Tarshish.

A great storm came up and Jonah persuaded the sailors it was his fault

-- actually, they threw lots and Jonah lost --

so they threw him overboard -- which was what he wanted.

Instead of drowning he was swallowed by a large fish.

While he was in the fish's belly

he prayed and repented;

three days later Jonah was delivered unto dry land.

He listened the second time God said for him to go to Nineveh.

Jonah walked into the heart of the city and said,

*"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

Now, if you told me an airplane crashed and everyone died,

you would expect me to believe you.

If you told me you saw on CNN that a flood wiped out an entire town,

I would accept what you said as fact.

Mass death we understand.

How about mass conversions?

The scriptures read:

*“And the people of Nineveh believed God;  
they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,  
from the greatest of them to the least of them.”*

Not only that, God repented as well.

God practiced what God preached.

The kicker is that Jonah got mad and went off and sulked.  
Clearly Jonah wanted God to waste the people of Nineveh  
-- not have mercy on them!

Jonah sulked and we can imagine his thoughts:

*God’s mercy spoils everything.*

A friend told me about the time his daughter ran into the  
living room

and gave him a great big hug. He could see in the  
mirror on the wall that

while she was hugging her father she was sticking out  
her tongue at her brother.

The dad didn’t know what to do or say,

but the mom saw this whole scene, too.

She said, *“Take your arms down from around your father’s neck.*

*He loves your brother as much as he loves you.*

*You cannot love your father*

*and stick your tongue out at your brother at the same time.”*

Could it be that this is what God saw Jonah and the Israelites doing?

Maybe they were acting all spiritual, loving God, following the Law,

serving one another, fasting, tithing, repenting,

going to fellowship dinners,

yet at the same time sticking out their tongues

at the people of Nineveh and those they chose to hate.

By sending Jonah to Nineveh, God was saying,

*“I love your neighbors as much as I love you.*

*You cannot love your Creator*

*and hate your neighbor at the same time.*

*If you think I only have eyes for you,*

*then the joke is on you.”*

During a recent debate on television before a live audience,

a candidate for President of the United States

said that our plan for American enemies should be to “kill them.”

In response, another candidate

suggested that our foreign policy should be based on the Golden Rule:

*“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

I am not speaking for or advocating any political candidate.

What I am is appalled at the response of the people who heard these words.

Immediately the crowd booed and hissed and gnashed their teeth.

Heaven forbid that we as a nation should repent,

should change our ways and practice the Judeo-Christian values

we espouse on the Sabbath but not on Monday.

In a sermon aired on Christmas Eve 1967,

Martin Luther King remarked how “happy” he was that Jesus had not said,

*“Like your enemies,” because there are some people that*

*“I find pretty difficult to like...*

*I can’t like anybody who would bomb my home.*

*I can’t like anybody who would exploit me.*

*I can’t like anybody who would trample over me with injustices.*

*I can’t like them.*

*I can’t like anybody who threatens to kill me day in and day out.”*

But he could love them, he said.

King articulated what was at stake for him

in loving those whom he could not like,

those who would be so much easier to hate.

*“We will not only win freedom for ourselves [through nonviolence],*

*we will so appeal to your heart and conscience*

*that we will win you in the process*

*and our victory will be a double*

*victory.”*

King believed that to abandon nonviolence

was to lose not just the double victory but any victory.

*“Hate is injurious to the hater as well as the hated,”* he said.

*“Hate is too great a burden to bear.”*

The Brewer-Calvert family was present in 1996 at a community-wide worship service

to demonstrate unity and support

after five predominantly African-American churches

were burned to the ground in Western Tennessee.

At the community service in Jackson, Tennessee,

a pastor asked a young girl if she was a member of one of the burned churches.

She allowed that she was.

He asked her if the police had caught the ones who did it. *“Not yet,”* she said.

*“But we have already forgiven them.”*

This child of God is helping us to see

that it is so possible to reorient our thinking,

to repent and follow in the light of God’s love and hope.

My grandmother helped raise me.

Mary Powers Siggers Calvert taught me manners and respect,

to eat creamed spinach, and to open doors for the person coming in after me.

We called her Marm.

I used to watch Marm write letters.

She had a writing desk in her sun room.

She wrote letters to each of the NY Mets and got their autographs for her grandsons.

She wrote letters to Peter Faulk – who played Colombo on television –

and offered to pay for the dry cleaning of his wrinkled trench coat.

When the TV detective had a cold, she wrote and offered him medical advice.

She kept pen pals with men in far off states.

In this day of Social Media we have lost – or altered -- the art of pen pals.

Marm's pen pals lived in Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana.



They could never visit her because they were all in prison.

Not only did she write letters to them and maintain a steady correspondence,

she wrote to their wives

and sent cards to their families on birthdays  
and special occasions.

Inside the cards would be a small check,

a gentle reminder that someone across the country,

someone across the tracks,

someone across the racial divide

cared.

What is truly remarkable about this story

is that Marm was born and raised a Southern Belle,

one who expected life and society to be a  
certain way,

a way that was predictable, unchanging  
and small-minded.

Marm's life was altered and upended

when her son intentionally moved into an urban slum  
to do mission.

Slowly, subtly, surely -- through her frequent encounters in the inner city –

Marm was exposed to the grace and mercy of God

Over time “they” and “them” and “others” became names and friends and family.

Her once sharply defined corners and edges were honed over the years and miles,

and her sense of vocation gradually took on new purpose and meaning.

And so, quietly sitting in her sun room,

she wrote letters and checks and prayers of thanksgiving,

and, sight unseen, built new relationships

each one tearing down Satan’s walls that divide, deride and decry hope

one brick at a time.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*