

“If We Obey God, We Must Disobey Ourselves”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 25, 2015
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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,
²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then 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. ⁸Human 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. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

¹⁰When 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

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ 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

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “**Follow me and I will make you fish for people.**” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

If you were to Google the “100 Best First Lines from Novels,” number one on the list is:

1. Call me Ishmael. —Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851)

“Call me Ishmael,” says the narrator, who then promptly takes the reader to church.

Ishmael starts our journey on a Sunday morning by going to Whaleman’s Chapel,

where he hears a memorable sermon by Father Mapple, who was once a whaler himself.

Father Mapple preaches on Jonah, and the theme of the sermon, which is also the theme of the novel Moby Dick, is

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

Father Mapple pointed out that Jonah learned this life lesson the hard way.

And maybe that is how you and I prefer to learn, as well.

Who was it in our church who told me she graduated with a Ph.D. from S.H.K.,

the School of Hard Knocks? (Mrs. Bonnie Darsy)

There are other ways to learn; we can learn from each other.

Let's start with Herman Melville's theological insight:

"If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves."

We may choose to phrase this in another way.

As sure as dawn follows the night,

there will be times and experiences in your life

when it will appear that the ways of God,

the ways of love and grace, mercy and truth,

are contrary to what you want to do

and say.

The time will come when God's will is contrary to your will.

When that moment, that experience, that crossroad rises up before you, stop.

Find a quiet place.

Find your quiet center.

Pray.

Speak what is on your mind and in your conscience.

Meditate.

Listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit

and the counsel of those whom you deem to be

trustworthy.

Then – and only then – act.

Act in accordance with the will of God.

Do not be surprised that in order to follow God,

to trust and obey God's will,

that you may – in fact – discover that you are

disobeying your own.
That's okay.
As a matter of fact, that is preferable.

The Bible speaks to us of Jonah, a parable offered to us by a soul on fire for the Gospel.

Jonah's name means "dove" -- which is also the symbol for Israel.
God told Jonah to go to Ninevah
and to proclaim God's judgment against them.

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

And God had it in mind that what the people of Ninevah needed to do

was to repent,

to turn 180 degrees away from doing evil
and turn instead toward God.

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.

As you may well imagine 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.

How many of us had heard the call to go to Ninevah,

but said, "You know, Tarshish looks a lot easier and more lucrative,

and it has swimming pools and an
open bar.”

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

Jonah headed to Tarshish on a small ship.

A great storm came up; surely all would be lost.

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.

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

Instead of drowning he was swallowed by a large fish.

While he was in the fish’s belly he prayed.

The Bible shares the prayer he lifted up, one that Hebrews learn as
children.

Jonah relented and repented and admitted that,

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

Three days later Jonah was delivered unto dry land.

He listened a second time as God said for him to go to Ninevah.

This time he went to Ninevah, the land of his enemies.

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

Jonah walked into the heart of the city and said,

“Yet forty days and Ninevah 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 Ninevah 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,
choosing to save and redeem the community
rather than lay desolation upon the land.

God practiced what God preached.

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

The kicker of the parable of Jonah is that afterward,
when Jonah should be rejoicing, he got angry,
and went off and sulked under an unpredictable
plant.

God found Jonah sitting just outside the city limits,
upset that mercy had been extended to the whole people of
God,

and the Lord said, “You do well to be angry.”

Clearly Jonah wanted God to waste the people of Ninevah -- not
have mercy on them!

Jonah sulked.

We’ve been there; we can imagine his thoughts:

God’s mercy spoils everything.

Clearly the human will for revenge shall be overcome by
our capacity for mercy.

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

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.

Dad didn’t know what to do or say, but Mom did.

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.”*

By sending Jonah to Ninevah, 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.”*

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.”*

Listen as Jesus compellingly invites us to live:

*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.”

Repent.

Repent, and believe.

Repent, and believe in the Good News.

In 1996, my family was present 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.”

“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

This amazing child of God helps us to see
that it is possible to reorient our thinking,
to repent and follow in the light of God's love and
hope.

We can learn by listening to her, to Holy Scriptures' wisdom, to
the God of Love,
or we can re-enroll daily in the School of Hard Knocks.

It's a choice we make most every day:

to love and obey.

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