

“MOVE!”

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 January 21st, 2018

This morning we are going to begin in a slightly different way from the usual start. In your bulletin you have an insert of a poem. This week instead of it just being read to you from the pulpit we are going to do this together. I will read it aloud and you will follow along with your insert. After that has happened, I will ask you several questions about it—no stress, it’s not a test, just an opportunity to pick your brains! It is a poem about two brothers, one adopted, attempting to get along. This poem was inspired by the TV Show, “This Is Us”. It is written by Rev. B. Kevin Smalls.

I never liked my brother
Probably too much attention to him
From my mother
I decided to look the other
Way
When he suffered
Whether he sought me
Whether he fought for me
I didn’t care...I have a brother
to spare.

I ignored him most of
My life...causing unmeasurable
Strife between us

On the football field
I'd not yield applause when
He made a great play

At the school dances I went my way
And left him to fend for himself
Leaving our issues on the shelf
I refused to be his brother.

We grew up from those years
Facing our own individual fears
We found a way to connect

He was black I was white
And in spite of those differences
Never recognized by my folks
I lived with different strokes
In my own way...adoption
Gave me my brother
And created this family concoction of
Sorts

But today, we are older
Grown men
Families that turn into similes

Like love
Like support like openness.

This time, I needed my brother
Not knowing he needed me.

I remembered his anxiety
Growing up
I, never having enough piety
To reach out...

But not this time...
I heard his break down
Through the distance
And I knew at that instance
What to do.

I went, no, I ran, fast as I can
To his office, found him
Bottled up in a corner
And unlike the former
Days
I showed up
Knelt beside him
This time

Held him
My crime
Reversed
In those years of deserting him
Grabbed him
As my father's voice chimed
In
On us...
With a gentle
Loving smother

“Never forget, he says, he's your brother.”

I answered
The call
I answered
My new standard
For loving.

He's my brother, I'm his
No other way...will do...

Nineveh will neva 'cause me fear
But mere willingness to
Answer with the simple declaration

He's my brother...I'm his

No other

Way...will do...

Interactive questions for the congregation:

What caused him to decide he "had a brother to spare"?

How did he react to this adopted "brother"?

As they grew older, what changed between them?

How did he know what to do when he sensed his brother's break down?

What did it mean "My crime reversed"?

How would you explain that "gentle loving smother"?

What was his new reaction to the call?

Why does Nineveh not cause him fear now?

How does this apply to our scripture of Jonah this morning?

Thank you for sharing your insights with us today. I know this was unexpected in a message. I'm supposed to be figuring this out, not you, so I appreciate your willingness to participate!

Let's go back to the scripture itself for a moment and see what insights can be gained. This passage begins with the news that "the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." That narrative detail compels us to go back and look at the background of the story up until this point. In addition, that narrative detail serves as its own kind of good news.

We make a mistake, you see, if we let the book of Jonah become only the story of a rather comical prophet and his uneven performance. Above all, the book is the story of the mercy of God!. And that mercy is high-lighted for us in the very fact that "the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Jonah had

not paid attention to that word the first time, you remember. Actually, he presumptuously defied it. And so the fact that the word of the Lord came to him again bears witness to a merciful God who does not give up on us just because we fail or rebel.

The divine mercy that the Lord afforded Jonah, of course, was the same mercy that Jonah later begrudged the people of Nineveh. This is a common irony among the people of God. The Lord deals patiently and generously with us, yet we turn around and dare to be impatient and stingy with others. Jonah is the real-life story of the unforgiving servant (see Matthew 18:23-35).

In this chapter, at least, Jonah does go to Nineveh according to the Lord's command. And there he preaches the word that the Lord gives him. Interestingly, verse 4 is the extent of what we know about Jonah's message to the people of Nineveh. While we enjoy a lavish mixture of both message and biography in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and while we read almost exclusively message material in the books of Amos and Joel, Jonah stands alone at one end of the spectrum. His book is almost entirely story. This lone verse in chapter three is the entirety of his recorded message. All the rest is his story.

Except, of course, that it is not his story. As we noted before, the story of the book of Jonah is the story of God's mercy. And that mercy is evident at every turn.

We see it first in the very call of Jonah. If the Lord's will was actually to destroy the wicked city of Nineveh, after all, then he wouldn't have sent a prophet to warn them about it. When I set out to swat a fly or a mosquito, I try to sneak up on the thing; I don't let it know my hand is coming. And so the Lord's commission of a judgment prophet is itself a sign of his mercy.

Next comes the Lord's patient chastening of his wandering prophet.

First there is the storm that frightens but does not kill. Then comes the big fish, which probably also frightens, but keeps the now penitent prophet alive and delivers him safely to land. And then comes the moment with which our passage begins: the second-chance word of the Lord. The mercy of God continues in chapter four. The Lord provides object lessons to try to teach his compassionless prophet. And even the content of God's correction of Jonah is patient and kind.

The ultimate mercy of God in the book of Jonah comes at the moment that concludes our selected lection. "God changed his mind," the narrator reports. "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

Rather than berate Jonah for his lack of faith or courage, let's acknowledge that he had been given a mission impossible. Nineveh was one of the greatest cities of its day. It was a city of conquerors, with a strong commercial base, superior technology and a powerful war machine. Jonah was from a strip of wilderness that the rest of the world passed through as a way station to somewhere else, kind of like I 80 running through Pine Bluffs on its way to Cheyenne in the west and Sydney to the east. Imagine yourself suddenly being in the southern area. God tells you to march through the hot desert and tell their leaders to repent, to stop the genocide, to hold democratic elections and respect everyone's civil rights, use their wealth for the good of all the nation's people. Do you think you would get their leadership to dress up in sack cloth and ashes? See what I mean? Jonah had a mission impossible!

Jonah may be one of our patron saints. The world conspires to make Jonahs out of all of us. The world beats us down and tells us that you can't change the big picture, so just fall in line and make the best living that you can for

yourself and your family. Our values may tell us we need to head East to Nineveh, but we turn around and walk west and get on the boat with Jonah, because it is just too hard. We spend some of our precious time in the belly of the whale, out of touch with our calling, our sense of meaning and purpose.

We are asked to go where God has asked us to go and to act now, to answer our call and to MOVE! In the TV show “Early Edition” the basic concept was that an average guy with a good heart and modest prospects receives an early edition of the Chicago times every morning that tells not the news of yesterday, but what is actually going to happen today, unless he does something to change the future. He spends his day trying to avert various disasters and when he is successful, the news in the paper actually changes. He has two friends that are alter egos, one who urges him on, and the other is more like Jonah, counseling him to let some things go because there are some things you just can’t change.

In one episode, the hero reads that an airline will explode and kill 150 people at O’Hare Airport unless he does something to stop it. He heads out, but the traffic is completely tied up in downtown Chicago and the subway trains are running late. He only has 30 minutes to take-off. As he waits for the train he reads the paper and sees a story about a six-year-old girl who was hit by a car. She dies because the hospital thought she had minor injuries and failed to examine her properly. Just then he sees the little girl going by on her bicycle. He has to make a split-second decision. There are 150 people about to die on the airline, but he may not get there, while the little girl is just down the street.

He runs after the little girl and reaches her moments after she is struck by a car. He scoops her up and races her on foot to the hospital. At the hospital, nobody believes she is badly hurt, and when he insists they examine her,

they tell him to wait in line. All his persistence gets him is an escort from the building by security. So he sneaks in and finally pressures a doctor into examining her. The doctor finds the problem and saves the girl's life. The twist in the plot comes at the end with two notes of providence. As the hero slumps in the hospital waiting room and rests, the doctor comes in to see him after the girl's surgery. The doctor apologizes and admits that he has been jaded, forgetting the human dimension of his work. He says, "You saved more than that little girl's life today. You may have just saved mine as well." Then the little girl's parents come to see her and her father is wearing a pilot uniform. He turns out to be the pilot of the airliner that would have exploded, but was called off the runway because his daughter had been struck by a car. It turned out to be a two-for-one rescue!

The show "Early Edition" wrestled with the dilemmas of what our role is in other peoples' lives. How would we act differently if we knew the potential difference our lives make to others. In our cynicism, it's easy to forget that divine providence may work through us, that God brings about the good by weaving together our daily decisions. Our nondecisions may cause the fabric to unravel until God can find someone who can still hear and act in faith, hearing the call and immediately following it.

God is near, God's power is at work, hear this good news and follow me. Do you sometimes wonder if all our busyness, our reliance on our computers and cell phones, the demands of our work days are just ways of protecting ourselves from the simple, life-changing power of the call of Christ? "Love your neighbor as yourself. Feed the hungry, house the homeless, and you have done it to me. Abide in my love and I will abide in you. You are the light of the world, so let your light shine before all that they may see the glory of God." Amen and amen.