

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
January 22, 2012
Rev. Diana Hartman
Worship Theme: Repent Now, Time Is Short
Jonah 3: 1-5, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1: 14-20

As we listened to each of our scripture texts read this morning, we find a common thread woven throughout. Each text speaks of change, of transformation due to the incursions of God into our world. In this the season of Epiphany, Christ's appearance among us, means that change is in the works. This was as true for Jonah, the first apostles and the early church as it is for us today.

The delightful and satirical comedy of Jonah reminds us that evil, cruel people in the world can change for the better. Paul speaks of the coming of Christ as nothing less than a whole new world. And Mark begins his gospel by having Jesus calling ordinary people to leave what they are doing and to follow him as disciples. Today, God continues to call us forth to new life, a new life we can truly have. We can change.

Does this sound familiar—the daily routine of eggs and bacon, or cereal and milk, coffee or tea then off to work—same desk, same tasks to be done, the same almost everything? Curious that we call this “life.” And yet there is something undeniably reassuring about life as routine, ritual, and habit. Some days, the only thing that keeps us going is the routine, the sameness of it all.

But there is another life, life just beyond the horizon, a life that we do not know rather than that which we know all too well. Don't we find ourselves longing for that life— life that is also becoming, moving up, moving out? We long for this transformation.

Yes, we are creatures of habit. The conventional is comforting. But sometimes, there comes a word, an invitation, a vocation, we hear our name called. We are addressed, and we come forward, and our world begins to change.

The Lord called to Jonah, but being a preacher was the last thing on Jonah's mind (I know just how he felt). Above all he did not want to go and preach at Nineveh, the worst of the tyrannical regimes of the ancient Near East, a great enemy of Israel. And yet to Jonah the voice of God came telling him, “Go!”

For Jonah and for us, the capital of our enemy is not filled with men and women, children and animals; it is filled with enemies who stand against us. Luckily we have God on our side. God always stands against our enemies—isn't that so? So, it is good news when God decides to destroy Nineveh, our enemy. There's just one catch here: “You, Jonah, go to Nineveh. Tell them they are to be destroyed.” Jonah doesn't want to go and speak to his enemies. Can you imagine having enemies that you don't want to speak to?

Can't you just see the wheels turning in Jonah's head? “Go tell them? Why bother? Wouldn't it be better to catch them by surprise and utterly destroy them? Don't just talk about it, Lord, just do it! Blast our enemies from the face of the earth.” If there is one thing worse than evil, cruel people in the world, like the citizens of Nineveh, it is evil cruel people who change for the better. We can understand Jonah. Like most of us, he wants vengeance, not preaching, so he turns tail and heads in the opposite direction, catching a boat for Spain.

What's a God to do when a prophet won't obey? Perhaps a storm at sea and great fish will help. The fella's on the boat figure out that Jonah is the problem and the storm is God's way of letting them know that.

But it's Jonah who suggests they throw him over board. You see, Jonah would rather drown in his own hatred than say a word to his enemy.

Now, you know this part of the story pretty well. Before Jonah hits bottom, a great fish swallowed him up and he stayed in the belly of the fish for 3 days and nights. God keeps Jonah in the fish's belly just long enough for Jonah to think about what he has and has not done—God's way of providing a time out chair, a bit of time with his nose in the corner. Finally, Jonah realizes his mistake, he bursts into song and prayer and with that, the fish vomits Jonah out right back on to the shore from where he started. (I guess he must sing about as off key as I do).

Once again God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah obeys. He trudges into the great city of Nineveh all the while probably hoping they won't change and he stands in the streets and shouts "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's it! Five words in Hebrew. Yet the response to the world's shortest and worst sermon is the greatest in the entire Bible. The people of Nineveh all repent. They start fasting; they all put on sackcloth, the dress of repentance, from oldest to youngest. The king and even the cattle, repent! Dogs, cats, kings—everybody repents. Can you picture it? Cattle draped in sackcloth? Dogs, cats, mice all running about in sackcloth! Nineveh, all of Nineveh, changes!

"I knew this would happen," pouts Jonah. "I knew you were a God who was merciful, forgiving, a God who loves to change the world, even our greatest enemies."

No wonder the early Christians in the catacombs, when they painted images and symbols of their faith, hardly ever directly depicted Jesus. They often depicted him as Jonah. Jesus, like Jonah, was the one who came preaching to God's enemies, and through his preaching, transformed them into God's best friends. That's the story told in today's gospel.

A few weeks ago, on Christmas, John the gospel writer proclaimed that the light has come into a darkened world. Jesus is the light. The way the light breaks forth is for Jesus to go into the world and to call ordinary people to be his disciples. The light is coming into the darkness. Just like the first light dawning on the first day of creation, Jesus brought a new world out of an old one. Change was in the works, change not just of individual hearts, but change for the whole world.

Thus Paul was not overstating things when he said to the Corinthians that, in Christ, "the present form of this world is passing away." You may have noted that in this Sunday's epistle, Paul urges some rather dramatic changes upon the church at Corinth. He tells them to get over their present arrangements and attachments, to get beyond their mourning, to live as if they had no possessions. How is it possible not to have our lives totally dominated by such concerns? We are creatures who are fixated with matters of marriage, food, and material things. Madonna had the honesty to sing, "I'm just a material girl," and aren't we all?

New life is possible only within the context of a new world. In Jesus, says Paul, an old world is losing its grip over our imaginations. A new world is being born. Christian ethics, the Christian life, is simply a matter of getting in step with the way things are now that Christ has entered this world. More than that, our present selves, with all of our preoccupations and attachments, are passing away. Something, someone new is being born. We can change.

In today's gospel, Jesus says to various fishermen and other ordinary folk, "Follow me." But just before he said that, just before his invitation, he makes a proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." In other words, the world has changed, the old time has ended, and a new time has begun. He invites them to be disciples as a sign of a new beginning for all people.

They followed, and neither they, nor the world, have been the same since.

This is the great promise I want you to hear today. We don't have to live in the old ways. We can have a new world, a new and transformed life!

I fear that sometimes we in the church obscure this great good news. We bolt down the pews. We go over the same thing, week after week, tell the same stories, begin at the same time and end at the same time. It's easy to get the impression that church is about sameness, routine, ritual, and permanence.

Not so. Church is about gospel, about the good news that the world has changed, and we have a gracious invitation to be part of the action. "Repent now, time is short!" we are told.

As you leave here today and go about your Monday, I want you to be open and aware, watching for signs of new life and a new world. Sometimes, the only solid evidence the world has that Jesus Christ is Lord, that the kingdom of God has come near, that a new age has dawned, is *you*. Amen.