

## **Dealers in Hope**

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Napoleon once said that a leader is a dealer in hope. Despite the methods of this messenger, it seems that Napoleon was on to something. St Paul said it this way in his second letter to the community at Corinth: "our hope for you is unshaken" (2 Cor 1:7). Unshaken hope, dealers in hope. As people of faith we are in the business of hope. Hope defined as desire accompanied by expectation, the feeling that what is wanted will happen, to trust, to rely.

The whole of the Christian story is a story of hope and each season gives us new opportunities, new ways to see our hope for God and God's hope for us. That is what all these weeks of Epiphany are about. It is the hope of God for God's people, to follow more faithfully, to serve more deeply to listen more carefully. To be bearers of God's hope, not ours, to a world that longs to hear it. And even though the story of the birth of Jesus in the manger at Christmas and the arrival of the wise men bearing gifts at Epiphany seem like a very long time ago, we are in these weeks where we try to think through and pray and ponder what this Epiphany might mean to us and to our world. Not in an abstract, one-off sense, but here in this parish, at this time, in this city and beyond.

Our scripture today is about hope, about God's hope for the people of Nineveh and about the hope of those men in the boat as they heard in the invitation of Jesus to follow him. Hope is not a naive disconnection from reality. It is in fact only after we have acknowledged the depth or despair of reality that any one of us can dare to hope. So whether you are feeling hopeful or hopeless this morning, know this: that the story of Jonah and the calling of Simon, Andrew, James and John might just give you a glimpse of hope that is grounded in the story of faith. And that hope will be bound up in the love of God, in the community of faith at prayer and in the bread and wine we will share.

The Book of Jonah takes up roughly two pages in the Bible. It is just 4 chapters long making it one of the smallest books of the Bible. It falls in that highly prized spot between Obadiah and Micah. What most of us know about it is what we learned in church school when we were 5 or 6 years old, namely that Jonah spent three days in the belly of the whale. Those among us that paid close attention might recall something about Jonah being on a boat in a storm and that the sailors, convinced that the storm was a punishment for their transgressions, drew lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So he was tossed by the sailor's overboard before landing in the belly of a great fish where he prayed to God. God heard Jonah's prayer, the fish spat him out on dry land, and he went to Nineveh as told. And there he throws one of the best temper tantrums in all of Holy Scripture.

I could read the entire Book of Jonah to you in less time than this sermon will take. But instead I will commend to your own reading this short story because I think Jonah captures in a wonderful way the challenges of humanity and our relationship with God. Jonah does everything we do - he is disobedient, he is obedient, he listens to God, he goes in the opposite direction of God on purpose, he pleads to God for mercy for himself, he delivers God's message, and when God

shows mercy to the people and animals of Nineveh, he pouts, he sulks, he asks to die. Jonah is human, Jonah is like we are, Jonah is a real person in a real relationship with the real God. And that is exactly what makes this story so compelling. Since the year 200, the Jews have read the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur as an example of true repentance.

So let me fill in some of the pieces about this story. The prophet Jonah is commanded by God to go to Nineveh, to warn the people of that city that because of their sins, they are doomed to destruction and God's wrath. Think of some of the recent ranting of Pat Robertson here for a moment. Now Jonah does not want to go, so instead he hops a ship to Tarshish and heads in the opposite direction of Nineveh. In other words, Jonah is disobedient. But God is not easily dismissed. A great storm arises on the sea and the sailors, in all their mariner suspicion, try to find out who is to blame for this crisis. As always, it is the stranger, in this case Jonah, on whom the blame falls. Jonah implores them to toss him overboard where he is swallowed in the belly of a great fish.

For most of us our knowledge of the story stops with the two main characters in the story, Jonah and the big fish. But there is much more to the story. This narrative is about Jonah as a reluctant prophet and about God who changes the divine mind and spares the lives of the sinners who repent. It is the story of the God of hope. God's unshaken hope, God as the dealer of hope.

I remember vividly the room in which many of us at seminary watched the news as the verdict in the OJ Simpson murder trial was read. We had just left chapel when someone announced that the verdict was about to be read so we found our way to the television in the commons. A stunned silence came over the room when the verdict was read and lots of conversations about justice and mercy ensued. Several days later there was an article in the Chicago papers that asked the question of several religious leaders about forgiveness and repentance and the question was framed this way. "Is forgiveness possible? Is it available to everyone? If OJ Simpson were to confess on his deathbed to these murders, would he be forgiven?" Several of those interviewed spoke of justice, of God's demands for repentance, of the punishment and wrath of God. The only Episcopalian interviewed said that of course forgiveness was possible, at all times and in all places, for all people and that it is God's to give, not ours. It is lavish and beyond our human understanding. It is the story of the God of hope. God's unshaken hope, God as the dealer of hope even to those we struggle to find worthy of redemption.

And it seems to me that that is where Jonah struggled and that is where we sometimes struggle. We want forgiveness and mercy when we sin and yet we demand justice and retribution when we are sinned against. We want God to be merciful even when we cannot or will not. And we at our most human, like Jonah, can and will sulk when God's mercy is offered to others. Listen to the words of Jonah after our lesson ends. You will recall that God changed God's mind, and here I quote the Book of Jonah: "God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

You might think Jonah would be delighted, but listen to what happens next.

"But this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish at

the beginning: for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said 'Is it right for you to be angry?'" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth there for himself. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

At Jonah's encounter with the God of hope, the God of mercy, the God of forgiveness, his response was to sulk. Jonah felt justified in his anger, afraid he had lost face as a prophet because what he had predicted about the destruction of Nineveh did not come to pass. The people repented and returned to God and God changed God's mind.

Obedience was not the benchmark for success for our friend Jonah. He disobeyed God and headed to Tarshish instead of Nineveh but that escape was ended by a superstitious bunch of sailors and a big fish with indigestion. Finally he got to Nineveh, to fulfill his task. But Jonah obedient is worse than Jonah disobedient. He preaches the word of God there and when the people listen and repent what does he do? He is angry and vindictive. He quarrels with God rather than rejoice that the people have listened to God's command.

Contrast our friend Jonah with Simon, Andrew, James, and John, who at the command of Jesus drop everything in an instant - their family, their livelihood and all that is familiar - to follow him. The Gospel of Mark seeks to make clear that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, to head in the wrong direction, to argue or pout or sulk. There is too much work to do. There is too much hope to make known.

By virtue of life of faith we are all dealers in hope with our Lord Jesus Christ. And because life is short and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us, be swift to love, make haste to be kind and share the hope that is ours in faith from the manger to the cross to the empty tomb and beyond.

Amen.