

Sermon for 24 January 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore, Maryland 21214

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12 (p. 787); 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

"Not me!"

Reading a biographical sketch on President Joe Biden, I came across this: Barack Obama asked him to be his vice-president, and he said no. He'd never worked for anybody. Obama asked him again, and Biden gathered a small group to advise him. His mother said, "The first African American to have a chance at being President, and you turn him down? Game, set, match!" Remember, this is the same person who told her children, "You're no better than anybody else." And" You're as good as anybody else."

I start with this because the theme of today's lessons is answering a call. Obviously my title refers to the Old Testament character of Jonah, and his answer to God's call. The incredible gift of scripture is to get us thinking, not to report a literal historic story. We ... human beings, able to imagine and act beyond basic wants and drives ... are bombarded our whole lives long with choices...and right now as a group we Americans are confronted with making democracy work.

There's no other way to put it. Maryland Senator Chris van Hollen said it this way in last Friday's Baltimore Sun: "I think people will hold our democracy more dear, recognizing how fragile it is. Look, we've been at this for more than 200 years, but if anyone assumed that it was inevitable, that democracy would continue, we got a wake-up call. That is a big part of Biden's call to unity. It means we have an obligation to nurture our democracy and make sure that, as we disagree, we don't blow up the entire system."

I would add, that means deciding whether to open schools or not, when the teachers' unions and parents are on one side and other parents and our governor are on the other. It means working at vaccinating people the best and fastest possible way. It means lying down every night with a prayer for everybody... and then praying for everybody sick,... and caring for the sick. Every time we turn around we're called. Paul says to pray without ceasing.

Notice how this first, oldest of the four Gospels shows every sign of simply facing the fact that Jesus wasn't coming back as soon as he preached or as the disciples thought and taught ... settling in for an indefinite outcome and deciding somebody better write something down ... and so starting with a grown-up man calling individuals away from everything they were doing ... and some of them accepting ...

....and then, backing up before that, this converted Jew, Paul, preaching, "the appointed time has grown short" ... "for the present form of the world is passing away."

It's not a straight line. The Bible is like our lives ...We have it both ways. Time is short .. and we have all day. Jesus was a man ... and Jesus is that movement in my heart towards justice, and hope, and a better world, and the peace that comes from dreams and lifts everything, like the

old song says. "Lord, lift me up, and let me stand, By faith on heaven's table land; A higher plane than I have found, Lord plant my feet on higher ground."

Somewhere in a period of less than a millennium, perhaps even only a few centuries, all over the world, the great religions came into being; and here we are, inheritors of our version, reaching beyond our regular duties, joining to envision an element of reality that is as basic to human nature as any of the basic senses or drives... our spiritual vision... here we are, describing Jewish and Christian versions of answering a call.

It's in the air these days. Our dear land, troubled and argumentative, is nevertheless facing some of the faults and divisions that have killed our souls over the generations, caused us to fight terribly among ourselves, and also to invade foreign territories for less than good causes, all sorts of less than rightful doings... We are it seems miraculously facing some of this in ways beyond anything humankind has ever seen. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Charles Dickens began his great novel of the French Revolution ... and we know in our bones what he meant, in this last two weeks, and in the hard work and the judgment calls we're facing in the next few weeks and months.

God is at work. The scripture is throwing that at us today, as it always does, but in a timeliness that is breathtaking. Each of us knows Jonah. "Not me!" Head in the other direction. Doubt you have the energy or standing to influence a situation for the better. Yet also, answer the charmed call of this unauthorized, maybe illegitimate figure who somehow heals and appeals and attracts and ... How can we deny the call? We're all susceptible, as we know from the crazy calls we get on our telephones every week, which wouldn't be coming if human beings weren't tempted to something beyond their routine and situation ... and dear God, most of us have answered and moved across the country or entered into a relationship or in some way gone past where we were, and we know some of that has been God-sent, that answering and moving and stepping out is life itself, over and over ... and the Bible is teasing us with our two sides, "Not me!" and ... somehow surviving to see a whole great city converted in spite of everything ... What was going on that inspired the author of Jonah to articulate such a character who forever makes us laugh while pricking our deepest consciousness with discomfort and even shame.

It's crazy. It's saving. It's the grace of God in Jesus Christ ... and we are part of it, new in this moment, thanks be to God.

Amen.