

Year B, January 21, 2018  
3 Epiphany  
Christ Church, Mexia

Lord, help us to see things your way, not just our own way. Amen

The gospel reading this morning gives us Mark's version of Jesus calling his disciples, which I talked about last week. And we don't often get a chance to talk about Jonah and, by the way, isn't that the greatest fish story in the world?

Jonah gets a call from God, and he doesn't want to do it, so he jumps on a ship and tries to run away. Really? Well, one of the first lessons from Jonah is, "you can run, but you can't hide," at least not from God. When I was in my teens, I was very active in my church; everyone seemed to think that I would go to seminary. I thought that maybe I should, maybe that's what God wanted, but I didn't want to do that - I had lots of reasons. So, I ran - followed my own path, so to speak; and look how that turned out! Well, after Jonah's adventure on the ship in the storm and in the belly of the large fish, he finally repents and agrees to go to Nineveh for God.

Now Nineveh, as we are told, was a large city - took 3 days to walk across it; obviously many people lived there. And Jonah must deliver some bad news to those residents, who, by the way, are Gentiles and he is a Jew! This is a tough assignment from which many of us may have tried to run. But Jonah walks not quite to the city center, but close, and yells, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." And lo and behold everyone believes him, and they repented and returned to God, and God is pleased and Nineveh is saved. What do you think would happen if I went over the Walmart parking lot in Mexia and shouted something like "in 40 days God will destroy Mexia?" What reaction might I get? (that's what I thought.)

Now God didn't direct me to do this, thankfully, so I would be doing it on my own, but still, don't we tend to look at people shouting messages of a religious nature in public places as mentally deranged people - sometimes people in churches may wonder if the preacher is deranged? Maybe it's a difference in culture today versus then. I mean, Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee according to Mark and says to some fishermen, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (fish for people?) - and they follow him! These people are dropping their work, leaving their families and going off with a total

stranger – one who says things that really don't make sense. Do you think people would do that today?

But maybe it's not ancient times versus modern times... Dr. Muhammad Yunus (Bangladesh) responded to an inner conviction that poor women on the sub-continent needed to be able to have access to small loans, with low interest, so they and their families could have a chance in life. And the Grameen Bank was founded and "microfinance/microcredit" was born and thousands of poor now have a better life there and in other places around the world.

Desmond Tutu heard the call of God, that all humans, regardless of the color of their skin, are created in God's image, and together with Nelson Mandela, they brought about an end to the evil of apartheid in South Africa. And I could go on, but these are mostly stories that you know about. So, it happens today; people are called by God, and sometimes in unlikely situations or unusual circumstances, to do difficult things, necessary things. The time of God's call is alive and well today!

But what about spreading the gospel, the good news; we're all called to do that – and it's seldom easy to convey the message to others, especially if we are somehow different from them – and that doesn't necessarily mean to the extent of wearing camel hair and eating locusts, like John the Baptist or preaching on a street corner or the Walmart parking lot.

So how can we get God's message to others? A different version of the story of the three little pigs is told by John Westerhoff – actually it's a sequel to the well known story... The three little pigs had settled comfortably into the brick house; years had passed since the crisis with the wolf and gradually they became bored. One day they decided that what they were missing had to do with love, and they determined to seek love's meaning. The first little pig went to the university library and read all she could on the subject; she learned a great deal, but her life was still empty. The second little pig learned about a famous pig who was coming to town for a revival at a local church. He attended and listened to all the sermons and was filled with enthusiasm and emotions. The emotional high lasted about 4 days, and then his life went back to what it had been before. The third little pig however invited two other families over to their house one evening and all three began to share their life stories, talking until late at night. They found this so interesting that they decided to meet regularly for such sharing and fellowship; eventually they came to care for each

other very deeply. One evening, after the other families had left, the third little pig said to her siblings, "Now I know what love is, for I have experienced it."

People may not know what they are seeking or what is missing from their lives, but they'll know it when they experience it. Maybe they won't respond to an invitation to come to this church, especially if you just have a casual relationship with them. And most people judge Christians by their actions, by their "fruit," so maybe a good way to spread God's word is through relationships to those outside of church. You don't even have to talk about religion at first, in fact you probably shouldn't. But eventually the time will be right, and if they like what they've seen and experienced with you, then they may want to expand on it by joining a larger group, a group which has the same values and warmth as you do.

So, I have a dream. I'd like to see us reaching out to people in the community, your community, not for the explicit purpose of getting them to come to church, but just to let them know we care – and not just at Thanksgiving and Christmas, as important as that is. A card or a phone call – congratulations when their child does something special, good wishes when they have a birthday, sympathy when they are experiencing grief... In a small town or neighborhood, it's easy to know these things; most of these events are news items in the local paper each week. In time they might want to come here and learn more about God and why we do what we do, but more importantly, whether they want to join us or not, they'll know that someone cares about them – that they are loved. And, sadly, a lot of people, too many people, don't know that today.

I hope you know that God loves you, and I love you...

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.  
Amen.