

“The Good News About Bad News”

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January 21, 2023

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

We have at least two people who work in news media in our congregation. I live with one of them. Over the years, I have learned a little bit about what goes into making the news.

- I know there are conversations at the top levels about what stories are newsworthy and what stories are not.
- I know that journalists, at least in some outlets, try to be careful of what stories and people and voices they amplify. They realize their reporting can easily change the course of news and even history, and they are careful with that power. Or try to be.
- I’ve learned that in an American market, there is a limit to our capacity to hear and have compassion for stories of bad news. As the saying goes, “Just as a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down;” sometimes we want to click on the story of a dog saving its owner who had fallen into a frozen lake, in between stories about 25,000 killed in Gaza. It helps our brains to digest and cope with bad news. Or maybe it just distracts us.

Our lectionary gives us examples of people called to share news. In Jonah, he gets called as a prophet to deliver *bad* news: “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” It is one of the shortest yet most effective sermons recorded in the bible—and there is no spoonful of sugar to go with it. In Mark, the brothers James and John get called by Jesus to deliver *good* news. “Come, I will make you fish for people,” Jesus told them in a sermon nearly as short.

As for the people of Nineveh, the bad news turned to good news: as soon as they heard the word that the prophet Jonah delivered, they changed their ways. “WHAT? God is mad at us? Let us immediately change our ways!!” They began a purifying fast, and everyone, great and small, wore sackcloth to show their remorse. The King even commanded that the livestock must also fast from food and water, and wear sackcloth, and everyone must cry mightily to God because, the King said, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

The bad news that the people of Nineveh heard from Jonah became good news, because it led them to a change of their ways, and God was moved by their change—and so God was even changed, too. Sure enough, God was moved to show Nineveh mercy, and the people were spared.

Now this telling is not a historical account. You can see other places in the bible where the people of Babylon, with Nineveh as its ancient city, were not people who were shown mercy or love by God. This little book slipped into our cannon, though, as a sign to Israel that even those who did not belong to God's chosen people could become people of God's mercy and love. It is another piece of good news—for those willing to receive it as such. As for Jonah, God's forgiveness of Nineveh was absolutely not good news—even when God first called Jonah to preach to Nineveh, he turned and ran the other way, hopping on a sailing boat to escape God's grasp. He ended up getting tossed overboard, swallowed by a fish, and—when Jonah realized he had betrayed God's call and showed remorse, was vomited up again by this great fish. Still he returned home and resisted going to Nineveh until God called to him and commanded that he go. He begrudgingly gave the worst sermon ever, but the people were so open to his word that they changed. And Jonah hated that. He could not let go of his hatred of the other enough to enjoy that God's good news for them was actually good news for him, too.

Do you ever feel like the news has been dumped onto *you*, “40 days, and YOU shall be overthrown?” Oh, if only we had the faith of Nineveh, coupled with the grace of God, and were able to turn bad news into good news. 40 days until Nineveh is to be overthrown... 40 days until your visa expires... 40 days until we will know whether the cancer is healing, or if it has spread... 40 days until you are laid off from your job... 40 days, and we will know for sure who is running for US President... 40 days, and if you cannot pay your rent, you will be evicted from your home... 40 days, and nothing will be left of Gaza. If only we could—like Nineveh—change what we have the power to change, and then know that God's grace and mercy follows.

I suspect that for many of us, we do not want to go first. We don't want to be *first* change ourselves, and *then* to allow God's grace and mercy to wash over us. Instead, we expect to *first* see evidence of God's grace and mercy. And then, and only then, we say, we will change. We will line ourselves up with God's will, we promise. Except when we actually are shown evidence of God's grace and mercy, we forget our intent to change, because things are good again!

Like the Ninevites, Andrew and Simon, James and John, also respond *immediately* to the news they receive. But in my head, I can imagine quickly how differently the story could have gone. As I tried to imagine the conversation that James and John had with their father Zebedee about leaving their fishing behind to follow Jesus, here is how it went:

James: Yo, Pops! This Jesus guy is the real deal. Simon and Andrew just left their boat to follow him. We're going to follow him, too.

Z: I thought we dealt with this when you were little boys. I asked you then, and I'll ask you now: if Simon and Andrew walk off of a cliff, would you as well?

John: It's not Simon and Andrew we are following. It's *Jesus!* His very short sermon spoken from the edge of the beach opened up something in us. We cannot *help* but respond! We want to be part of this good news that is spreading.

Z: But what about these nets?

James: Um, okay, well, uh... I *suppose* we can help you draw them in.

Z: But we have only been fishing for 2 hours, and our nets aren't nearly half-full yet.

John: So, are you saying we can go, since you can manage the half-empty nets on your own?

Z: No! I'm not saying that. I'm saying if we bring in our nets now, we won't have enough fish to make any kind of profit at the market. What will your mother say?

James: So then... what if we split, and you send the boat back out, and then *you* can catch a full day's worth of fish?

Z: But who can help me pull in the full nets?

John: You? I mean, you taught us everything we know. You're the best in the business, Pops!

Z: But I am an old man now. I cannot manage such things on my own.

James: So maybe we *all* take a break for a bit. We have enough; our fish business has done well in the market over the years. Our household has enough to get by, and even to help our relatives a bit. Wouldn't you like to sleep in one morning, without having to leave and take the boat out before dawn? And imagine how much Amma would enjoy taking a journey with you to see cousins who live further down the Jordan River. This is a chance for John and me to change our lives, and maybe change the world!

Z: ...*A change?* ...*(with more certainty) A change...* *(gladly) A change!*

James: Nah, John. You know what, Pops? We got this. We're not going anywhere. Who knows what this life with Jesus would lead to, anyway? Come on, I see fish leaping over there— right where Andrew and Simon were fishing before. Let's bring the boat around that way!

In my imagination, while James and John entertain the notion of what following Jesus could do for them, the good news it could bring to their lives and maybe for their world, they get pulled back into the rip tide of other expectations.

Is there something you are trying to let go of, that keeps pulling you back in, keeping you from letting go of the nets?

I recently had a spiritual lesson about letting go. As a practice to complement my Christian faith, and to also increase my groundedness, I decided to try a session of one-on-one meditation training. Now, you may know that I grew up with a father who regularly meditates and has also been a meditation teacher to many others since I was a child. So maybe it was my youthful rebellion that I never learned to meditate from him. In college and graduate school, I took classes on world religions, including one from a Tibetan Buddhist monk. The class ended with a very short meditation, which was pleasant, but not long enough before we were changing classes. I also respect that our Christian faith has a rich tradition of meditation, which I have explored to some extent, through the ancient desert fathers and mothers, and the practice of contemplative prayer, and through the music of Taize. But to be honest, I have always gravitated more to the sense of spiritual connection I get when I am in community, such as on Friday when I spent the day with Maliha, welcoming her new baby. I left feeling relaxed and spiritually glad. Still, I long for a balance of deeper inward richness to match my outward action. And so, I found myself last week at a local meditation center, sitting before a young man who was trying to teach me to meditate.

As he was explaining to me in very simple terms the concepts of meditation, I found my mind was jumping to Buddhist and Hindu concepts I had learned in school. I was sorting through my mind to match basic phrases with Sanskrit or Tibetan terms I had learned. I was also comparing what he said to what I know of Christian prayer and contemplative practice.

But what I really needed to do, was to let go, and to hold the imaginary apple my meditation teacher was asking me to hold. And then, cast it into the imaginary fire and watch it disappear. Eventually, I slowed the wheels of my brain, and I could see myself doing that, and with each new thought that arose— there were many of them— I tried to hold the thought in my hand, and then gently cast it into the imaginary fire to watch it dissolve.

Jesus invited those who would become his disciples to “leave your nets and follow me.” It is easy to imagine what they were losing. When we feel anxious, it is an immediate fear. It is a 40 day fear. Hope is based farther into the future, so it is hard to have faith

because we cannot imagine its rewards in an immediate way, because we are more focused on our anxieties. May we be like the people of Nineveh, and like James and John, Andrew and Simon, in our ability to trust in a future we cannot yet see, rather than cling to the fears we already know. May we be blessed enough, if we hear holy news calling, to let go of our nets and to follow.