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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/25/2009, The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:14-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”(Mark 1:14-15, RSV)

I bet there is a Pennsylvania Dutch word for the reality from which Christ rescues us. From my Pennsylvania days, I have a vague memory of it being something like “frahuetled.” Whatever the word is, it means a “chaotic, confusing existence.”

When Jesus came into Galilee, he preached good news, saying that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand. And that was quite literally so. For if the King has arrived, then the kingdom is indeed at hand. And that the King had arrived is quickly demonstrated in the stories of the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John. The King bids them come, and they up and follow him.

These were different sorts of fisherman. Andrew and Peter were the humble sort, while James and John were more prosperous. Andrew and Peter were poor fisherman, casting their nets from the seashore. James and John were entrepreneurs, with their own boat and with hired servants. But these economic differences do not matter. They are overcome by the simple reality that Jesus has drawn near, and in drawing near, he rescues these fishermen from *frahuetle*. That is, Jesus rescues them from our human race’s uneasy existence, casting around for our path, wondering who we should follow. He replaces our fretful, uncertain existence with his kingdom. At last, we find the one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. His yoke is easy because it comes from the One who loves us. And his burden is light because it is true! We do not need rest and leisure so much as we need to know that our path is life is true, and it *is* true if Jesus is our Shepherd.

It is of central importance to this story that Andrew and Peter, James and John do not follow Jesus because of profound reasons. They simply follow him because they have been given the grace to understand that he is the One worth following. And in following him, they find peace for their souls and become useful to others. Indeed, they become fishers of men — no longer mere fishers of fish, but fishers of humanity.

I am amazed and humbled by these call stories. I mean, Peter and Andrews, James and John and the rest of the disciples: these were simply people, like unto you and me. They had their own settled ways, their own momentums, including momentums of sin. They had their own vices, their own virtues, their own hopes and needs and fears, their own habits luring them backwards. Yet, Jesus comes along and bids them follow him, and they do. They forsake their old ways, and they are off with Him! Let us be like them. Whatever the backward pull, let us nonetheless surrender ourselves to Jesus and follow him.

Martin Luther has a very interesting way of expressing the Gospel. In his commentary on the Second Article of the Creed, Luther seems to think that the great thing about Jesus is that he is our Lord. Now, the word “Lord” is not ordinarily a friendly word — at least, not at first. For your Lord is your sovereign. He is the one with the right

to the final say in your life. But Luther seems to think that the key question in a human life is not whether we have a Lord, but whether we have the *true* Lord — the Lord who not only directs us, but loves us. Listen to Luther on this matter of a Lord:

If you are asked, “What do you believe in the Second Article, concerning Jesus Christ?” answer briefly, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.” What is it to “become a Lord”? It means that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil. Before this I had no Lord and King but was captive under the power of the devil. I was condemned to death and *entangled in sin and blindness*.

Does not this sound familiar? Does not this sound human: that until Jesus came along, we were “entangled in sin and blindness.” And the sweet thing about Jesus is that he is the kind of Lord who saves us from death, sin, and blindness. He rescues us from being *frahuetted*, from being entangled in chaos and confusion.

And because Jesus rescues us from our fretful, uneasy existence and from being entangled in chaos and confusion, his appearing is what is called “gospel.” That is, it is “good news.” That’s how this morning’s Bible reading puts it. It starts off with the ominous news about the arrest of John the Baptist, but proceeds immediately to speak of Jesus and of good news, of the “gospel”:

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the *gospel* of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

And in the end, there is no understanding Jesus unless we understand that when he approaches you and bids you to follow him, why, good news itself has approached you. The holy Gospel itself has entered your life.

The question posed by this morning’s Bible story of the call of the disciples, Peter and Andrew and James and John, is this: When Christ calls us, would it not really be better that we should up and follow him? Wouldn’t it be better to change our path, even get up from our nets and boat and our settled way of life, and follow a new path precisely because we sense that new path to be *good news*? We own it as good, our heart holds back, but would it not really be better that we up and follow Jesus?

At first glance, our Old Testament story - the story of Jonah - would suggest that it is possible to repent at the approach of *bad news*. And so, Jonah goes from one end of the city to the other with this grim saying:

“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Wonderfully, the people of Nineveh believe Jonah and repent, from the greatest of them to the least. I admire them very much for this.

After all, St. John Chrysostom observed that there was an alternative available to the Ninevites. Given that they believed the preaching of Jonah, they could have fled the city. That would be natural enough. I mean, if Homeland Security told us New Yorkers that “Yet forty days, and terrorists will explode a nuclear weapon in our city,” I could well believe that many of us and our neighbors would flee the city. Perhaps only the poor and the frail would be left in our town to try to endure the explosion. But the Ninevites did

not flee the city, but rather, they repented. They proclaimed a fast, they wore sackcloth and ashes, and their king gave them wise counsel:

... let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?"(Jonah 3:8-9, RSV)

They did all this with no promise that their repentance would be acceptable to the Lord. In fact, the preaching of Jonah was bitter, in full accord with his hatred for that town. He did not say, "*Unless* you repent, you will be overthrown." No, he gave them no hope at all. He simply raged at them, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh *shall be overthrown!*" Still, the people repented. They did not flee the city, but rather their ways. To use the fine words of Chrysostom: "Therefore they trusted for safety, not to a change of habitations, but of habits."<sup>1</sup>

So, I give credit to the people of Nineveh for repenting at the approach of bad news. And yet, I have lived with the story of Jonah long enough to come to suspect that the true story of repentance here is not the repentance of the people of Nineveh, but the offer of repentance to that stubborn prophet Jonah. He is the bitter one. And he is the one who is called to reckon with good news — only it is good news that his heart does not yet want to hear: the good news that with the Lord, there is mercy and the forgiveness of sins. Jonah does not want this good news because he does not want Nineveh to be forgiven. But in resisting the Lord's mercy, Jonah is sawing off the very branch from which he dangles, as do we all dangle. He resists the good news that with the Lord there is forgiveness, and in such resistance, he would cut himself off from hope, for each of us, even Jonah, have fallen short of the glory of the Lord and depend upon our Lord's willingness to forgive.

Let me try to develop this Jonah option — this human temptation to resist good news — by speaking of St. Augustine.

Recently, I read and lingered with that magnificent Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions*. Here the saint tells of his conversion to Christ at age thirty-two, after years of being drawn to Christ, yet hesitating to yield himself to our Lord. He hesitated in spite of the fact that he credited Jesus and life in Christ as being good news. And it was indeed good news, not only for Augustine, but also for you and me. Still, it was the kind of good news that required repentance. It required a change in his path. And alas, Augustine's old sins still beckoned to him.

It seems that Augustine had reached the stage in life when he could abandon his old sins, every one, *except* for his love of women. He speaks of the conflict in his heart this way:

Because of a perverse will, was lust made; and lust indulged in became custom; and custom not resisted became necessity. By which links, as it were, joined together (whence I term it a "chain"), did a hard bondage hold me enthralled. But that new will which had begun to develop in me, freely to

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<sup>1</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*. Volume 9, First Series, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Scharff (Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, Massachusetts), page 377.

worship Thee, and to wish to enjoy Thee, O God, the only sure enjoyment, was not able as yet to overcome my former wilfulness, made strong by long indulgence. Thus did my two wills, one old and the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, contend within me; and by their discord they unstrung my soul.

This spiritual conflict: it “unstrung my soul.” The man was in agony, wanting to turn to Christ, yet holding back because of the lure of his old sins. He condemned himself for his spiritual lethargy by which he had lingered in sin, month after month, year after year:

Nor had I aught to answer Thee calling to me, “Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” And to Thee showing me on every side, that what Thou saidst was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to reply, but the drawling and drowsy words: “Presently, lo, presently;” “Leave me a little while.” But “presently, presently,” had no present; and my “leave me a little while” went on for a long while.

And then we come to the very moving Chapter VII of this Book VIII. The English Victorian editors give this summary of the Chapter:

Chapter VII.--He Deplores His Wretchedness, that Having Been Born *Thirty-Two Years*, He Had Not Yet Found Out the Truth.

Thirty-two years. I hope you will take some encouragement from those numbers. We are speaking of St. Augustine, one of the greatest saints of the Church, the spiritual father of Martin Luther a thousand years later, for Luther was the pride and joy of the Augustinian Order in the Sixteenth Century. Some people come early to Christ and without much struggle, but not everyone does. And some of you are not yet thirty-two. Indeed, this congregation seems to be getting younger and younger, and so a good number of you are not yet thirty-two. Therefore, if you should find yourself betwixt and between, wanting to draw closer to Christ yet failing so far to do so, do not be overly discouraged by that. You have received your Christian formation and are sorting things out as best you can. By fits and starts, successes and failures, you are progressing and drawing nearer to Christ. Why, you might yet be St. Augustine in the making. I can well believe that of you.

This Chapter VII is the one with Augustine’s famous line with the words “not yet”:

But I, miserable young man, supremely miserable even in the very outset of my youth, had entreated chastity of Thee, and said, “Grant me chastity and continency, *but not yet.*” For I was afraid lest Thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished.

But, God be praised, this Chapter VII also tells the story of Augustine’s conversion and of his final surrender to Christ. Then, the man found peace, and our world found one of its greatest fishers, not of fish, but of humanity.

Now, earlier I said that Andrew and Peter, James and John did not follow Jesus because he gave them a convincing argument, but simply because they had been given grace to understand that He is the One worth following.

You have the same reason. I do believe about you that there is something tugging in your heart when you hear the story of Jesus. I believe that you too have been given the grace of a disciple and you intuitively recognize that peace and health for you consist in following Jesus.

But you have an advantage over those early disciples. You have an additional reason for following Jesus — a reason that those early disciples did not have. I mean the testimony of good folks in your life who have lived for Christ and never regretted a minute of it, but only regret that they did not follow him better than they did. That is, you have the encouragement of the whole Communion of Saints, including perhaps, your mother, your father, your grandparents, or that one in your life who has captured your heart. Do not despise the witness and the life of such good people. View them as part of the continuing ministry of Jesus by which he comes up to us fishing on the shore and says even to us: Follow me.

It was good news that drew the crowds and drew the early disciples. It was not the fiery preaching of John the Baptist, nor the wrathful preaching of Jonah. It was not threat with converted the world, but the drawing near of something the early disciples sensed was very good. In Jesus of Nazareth, the very kingdom of God was drawing near. In Jesus, at last they had found their Lord, and in finding him, they had found themselves and their path in life.

Let it be so with us, with increasing earnestness. Let us renew our obedience to that gospel call to leave our fishing nets and to follow Him who will bring peace to our souls and make us fishers of humanity, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.