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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2024
Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:14-20
Who Is Included in the Mercy of God? You!

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

My sermon this morning is about the wide-ranging mercy of God. Never fear! God's mercy is big enough to include you and me.

I would like to begin this sermon with a quote from Bible scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier, now of blessed memory. She is commenting on our reading from Jonah 3. Her words go this way:

Like Jonah, we are quite sure that we know upon whom God should wreak his wrath - not upon us, of course; Jonah didn't think God should judge him! But the Lord of heaven and earth and sea forgives and saves the most unlikely people - the Ninevites, a thief beside him on a cross, a bunch of deserting disciples, a Saul who had persecuted Christians, and yes, incredibly, even you and me. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."¹

Elizabeth Achtemeier is right that Jonah supposed that God should wreak his wrath upon the Ninevites. They were the enemy of Israel. In fact, Nineveh was enemy of much of the whole world, because that city was the capitol of the dread Assyrian Empire. Jonah would rather run to the other end of the earth than preach to the Ninevites. In fact, Jonah did head off in that direction — the other end of the earth — but the storm upon the sea and the mighty whale stopped him, and he had to reconsider. So, he changed his direction and preached to Nineveh. He changed his direction but not his heart. (What will it take to make some of us change our minds, change our hearts?) So, though Jonah preached to that enemy town, he did not speak of God's mercy. Instead he spoke of destruction! His severe sermon went this way:

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:3-4, RSV)

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts: 001* (Kindle Locations 7404-7406). Kindle Edition.

No mercy here! In fact, Jonah does not even raise the possibility of mercy, repentance and forgiveness. He simply proclaims destruction: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The future Jonah proclaims is a dark future. He offers no hope to the people.

But the people of Nineveh repented anyway. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. They did not run for the hills, but rather fasted and prayed that God might have mercy on them. To use the marvelous words of Chrysostom: They changed not their habitations, but their habits. That is, they changed their ways. They turned from their evil ways and from the violence in their hands, and they hoped that God might notice their repentance and save them.

And God does save them. As our text puts it:

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:10, RSV)

This makes Jonah so mad he is likely to have a stroke. He is furious with the LORD and he says so:

¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, "I pray thee, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. ³Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1-3, RSV)

I doubt that Jonah is complaining that God is capable of being gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. That would be insane, to complain about such good things in God's nature. Rather, Jonah is bitter that the LORD should direct his steadfast love and willingness to forgive, toward Nineveh! Jonah does not mind that the LORD's mercy should extend to Israel and to himself, but it goes too far to extend it to the *enemy*. That's what Jonah believes.

But then Jesus comes along and speaks of the *enemy*:

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you,

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

And so it is that we learn that the book of Jonah anticipates the truth — a truth that Jesus both preached and lived. Jesus loved the enemy. Even as he was dying on the cross, we can hear him pray, “Father, forgive...” Jonah might have protested about the mercy of God, but no matter. That is simply how it is: Our God is a God of mercy.

To my mind, the beautiful thing about this morning’s Gospel Lesson is that we see God’s mercy reaching out to include some more unlikely people. I mean, the fishermen.

Let’s pause for a moment to reckon with the idea of God’s mercy. Many things could come to mind when we think of God’s mercy. We could think of the regaining of health, for example. In the mercy of God, many sick people have become well. We could think of blue skies and sunny weather. In God’s mercy, dreary weather often gives way to nice weather. We could think of the restoration of broken relationships. In His mercy, God can arrange and rearrange things so that we actually make progress in regaining peace with someone. And, of course, there is the great mercy of forgiveness. There is the possibility, authorized by Jesus himself, of absolution following confession. But in speaking of the fishermen, I am thinking of another form of God’s mercy. I am thinking of a form of mercy that is open to you and me too.

I mean the mercy of friendship with Jesus. I mean the mercy of discipleship. Jesus called those fishermen, Peter and Andrew, John and James, and made them his friends. He called them and made them disciples. In their case, he called them and made them apostles — fishermen of humanity!

Notice what I am saying about mercy. I am saying that a new manner of life can be a real blessing in our life — an expression of God’s mercy in our lives. Often when we think of blessings, we think of receiving something nice — health or wealth or romance and so on. But that is not what I am talking about here. I am talking rather about an upturning of our life, so that in the end, we learn new ways of living and we acquire new ideals and goals in life. Indeed, friendship with Jesus means the way of the cross.

Think of those fishermen. Till Jesus came along, they might have been happy as clams. They knew their jobs. Those jobs might have been hard, when the weather is rough and the seas are high, but they were fishermen. They might have been in a long line of fishermen. They might have learned their craft well from fathers and uncles and grandfathers. They might have made enough money to take care of themselves and their loved ones. So, we can imagine these fishermen to be content — with the contentment that many a working man and working woman knows.

But now, here stands Jesus on the shore. He beckons to the fishermen. “Come, follow me.” And in the following they become different men. Jesus does not call them to a rose garden. He calls them to hard labor for the Church and for the salvation of human souls. And these fishermen do it! So do the other Twelve — all except for the very sad case of Judas. The call of Jesus launches these fishermen into new disciplines and new hopes and dreams. My theme is that the mercy of God does not amount simply to heaven and all its joys. It also includes a new manner of life here below, in this earthly life and the time that remains to us.

So, you and have been fishing. We have been doing so all of our lives. Even if we are Christians, we are tempted to mind our own business, to do our jobs, and to try to take care of ourselves and our loved ones. We give our minds and our hearts over to Jesus in the Sunday worship service, yet when Monday comes, here we are again, fishing, minding our business.

But the stubborn thing about Jesus is that he is always *there*... always on the seashore calling us to follow him that day, including Monday and every day.

Without Jesus standing on the seashore calling to us, the daily labors of even respectable people tend to be disorganized, agitated, or indifferent to the welfare of others. We get preoccupied with our legitimate concerns and responsibilities, with our pleasures and hobbies, perhaps even with our sins and vices. But Jesus stands on the seashore calling to us to follow him this day and every day. And when we follow, life becomes more focused. We still have our legitimate work to do, but all of our work and rest come under the direction of Jesus and take on a more holy character.

Without Jesus directing our day, our work is jumbled that day, like a kaleidoscope out of focus. Maybe you have played with one of those devices — the kaleidoscope. When you first look through the tube, you might see pretty colors, but they are not yet on track. Then you twist the tube and bit by bit the image clarifies. So it is with us when we heed the call of Jesus. Things become more clear. And we become more useful to God and to our neighbors that day.

Well, Jesus is indeed standing on our seashore calling to us — even to us — to come follow him. He first called us when we were baptized, but he never wearies of calling us, day by day. It might displease Jonah that God calls the Ninevites and other disreputable people, but there we have it! Our God is a God of mercy, including the mercy of following Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.