

Change We Can Believe In

Some of you may have recognized the title of my sermon this morning as being the same as the title of a book by our new President, released shortly after he became the nominee of his party. I chose that title in part because there have been some interesting connections in themes between what President Obama has said this week and what I had planned for some weeks to focus on in our scriptures this morning. But there are also some important differences between the Good News and call of God on the one hand and political ideology and rhetoric on the other, no matter how stirring those human ideas and words may be. So you will hear me make some reference this morning to President Obama's inaugural address and his thoughts on "Change We Can Believe In," particularly as regards his call to national and individual responsibility, but you will also hear me giving higher focus to the calling of our God and of God's Christ to make changes in our lives based on who we believe on. I'm going to talk this morning about repentance, a word that has fallen out of favor for many of us; about how it has been understood in the past and about how we may come to grips with the call and the promise inherent in that word for our own lives. And although I'm not going to issue an old fashioned Baptist altar call, I am going to issue an invitation to all of us to let those four Galilean fishermen be our exemplars as we commit to following the Way of Jesus.

I want to begin, though, as I so often do, by refreshing our memories on some of the less-well known details of the story of Jonah. Even before Christy Deer told the story to our children this morning, I'm sure that most of us remembered that Jonah had been swallowed by a whale. We probably remembered that he was trying to avoid the work God had for him to do and we may have even remembered that he was supposed to be going to preach in the city of Nineveh when he boarded that boat for Tarshish. We are less likely to have remembered that Nineveh was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire or what that would have meant to a man like Jonah.

Assyria was the superpower of its day. Its armies were well-known for both their efficiency and their ferocity. Assyrian policy was to completely destroy any nation they conquered by forcibly moving any surviving inhabitants to lands far away within their empire and resettling other conquered people in their place. This was the eventual fate of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Although this had not yet happened in Jonah's time, Assyria would still have been seen as an ominous, threatening presence on the international scene. The Rev. Dr. William J. Carl III, president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, says that to understand Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh that we should "imagine an African-American being asked to go preach to the Ku Klux Klan." Rev. Todd Weir says that Jonah "was given a mission impossible... Imagine yourself suddenly being sent to the Sudan where the government is perpetuating a genocide of Christians in the southern area. God tells you to march through the hot desert and tell their leaders to repent, to stop the genocide, to hold democratic elections and respect everyone's civil rights, use their wealth for the good of all the nation's people. Do you think you would get their leadership to dress up in sack cloth and ashes? For that matter, imagine going to Washington, DC and demanding that elected officials stop the legalized bribery of our campaign finance system. Do you think you could bring both houses of Congress to sack cloth and ashes?"

And yet, despite the seeming impossibility of his mission, despite his own continuing reluctance to actually exercise his prophetic calling from God to speak truth to power, to give warning to his enemies, Jonah succeeded! The Scripture tells us that "the people of Nineveh believed God;" they went into mourning for their sins and "they turned from their evil ways." They accepted

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corporate responsibility for what they had done and what had been done in their name and they made immediate changes in their lives.

We don't know much about the sins of Nineveh. In Jonah 1:2, God tells the prophet, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Our one clue is in the direction that the king gives to his people, "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." Certainly the idea that violence characterized their culture can be extrapolated from their ruthless treatment of their defeated enemies. It seems likely that the Ninevites were not simply being called to renounce individual ways of living that were wicked but that God was calling them to take collective responsibility for the political violence undertaken in their name. The understanding of a national group or tribe being corporately responsible for the actions of its members permeates the Old Testament, although it is not a concept given much credence by our individualistic American culture. More on that in a moment.

It is also worth noting that the Ninevites and their king responded immediately and sincerely to the prophet's warning. There is no sense here of irony or hypocrisy. Traditionally, this story is read in synagogues on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as an example of true repentance. We find in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that Jesus commended the Ninevites as a model of change. The Koran also follows this tradition. It is indeed possible for people and individuals to hear the word of God and to make an honest and immediate response.

Alas, there is a sad coda to this story. While the leaders of the Assyrian Empire may have turned away from violence for a time, they surely turned back to it, as we know from their destruction of Israel, the genuineness of their repentance notwithstanding. Perhaps they were like the seeds that fell on rocky soil in Jesus' parable of the sower: they heard the word and immediately received it with joy; but had no root, and endured only for a while and fell away. And so, in the inevitable course of consequences, they were destroyed in turn by the Babylonians, never to be a significant power again. Nineveh is now merely ruins situated across the river from the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, which has likewise felt the sting of the consequences of human violence. Rudyard Kipling, the great British story-teller and poet, reflected on the impermanence of empire on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and used Nineveh as an example of lost glory:

Far-called our navies melt away--
On dune and headland sinks the fire--
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget--lest we forget!

As I mentioned earlier, we Americans are not particularly good at corporate responsibility, regardless of the many passages in the Old Testament that point us towards it. We are simply too focused on our rights as individuals. But our new President is certainly issuing a call in that direction. In his Inaugural Address, he said, "Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age." President Obama also called for a smaller collective to

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assume responsibility for their actions – our elected and appointed leaders: “And those of us who manage the public's dollars will be held to account, to spend wisely, reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day, because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government.” He also called for a wider group to step up to corporate responsibility, namely the citizens of all of the so-called First World nations: “And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and we must change with it.”

If this sounds like mere political rhetoric to you, consider the words of the Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly, Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary: “We can definitely affirm that the actions of persons and nations have consequences for good or for ill. This was the case of “godless” Nineveh and it is surely the case for the nations of the earth, including the United States of America and Canada. In the interdependence of life, we often reap what we sow, personally, congregationally, and nationally. The ongoing economic crisis, terrorist threat, unease in the Middle East, starvation in Africa, and global climate change are hardly accidental, but the result of decisions made by political leaders, nations, everyday people, and corporate entities. We are now reaping a harvest, seeded by greed, individualism, nationalism, resentment, short-sightedness, and materialism. Can we choose life rather than death when faced with such complex and intricately connected threats?”

Several centuries after Jonah was called by God to take a message of change to Israel's greatest enemy, God sent another prophet with a message of change but this time to God's Chosen People. His name was John. Mark tells us, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Such messages of change are rarely appreciated by those in power and, in short order, Herod had John arrested. Mark continues, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

That word, repent, causes us all sorts of problems today. We associate it with crazy street preachers carrying signs that say “Repent! The end is near!” We associate it with fire-and-brimstone preachers, scaring little kids and adults alike into making weeping confessions with the vivid imagery of an angry God and eternal punishment. We associate it with the kind of demonstration that the Ninevites made with their sackcloth and ashes – something that seems over-the-top, forced and perhaps even fake in our cultural sensibility. Not that we wouldn't like to see this action from some, anyway. Radio and TV commentator Cokie Roberts said rather famously of those responsible for the failure of financial institutions this fall, “I'd like to see the CEOs of these companies marched down Wall Street in sackcloth and ashes.” But that's not really what Jesus or John or even Jonah was calling for.

The word Jesus and John used was probably the Hebrew word “shuv” or its Aramaic equivalent. It means “to return.” In the New Testament, of course, it was written in Greek, μετανοια, literally, “to think after” or “to think differently;” to change one's mind, in other words. Although repentance in Jesus' sense has nothing to do with sackcloth and ashes, it does have a great deal to do with taking responsibility for our own actions. If Jonah was calling the

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Ninevites to take a collective responsibility for the actions of their nation, then John and Jesus were calling their hearers to take individual responsibility for their own actions. Just as we heard a call to collective responsibility from President Obama this week, we also heard a call to individual responsibility. Mr. Obama reminded us that “as much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break; the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours.” Our new President also said, “What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility -- a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task.”

Jesus' call to repentance is a call to change one's mind and to return to God, to return to our original relationship with our Loving Creator, the relationship all of us have with our Heavenly Parent before we turn away towards self-centeredness and brokenness and sin. Jesus also has a further word of explanation about what we are to return to – the Good News. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is shown healing the sick, forgiving sins, in relationship with sinners and collaborators and Gentiles and women. In the person of Jesus, we see both the power and the love of God for all humankind. To believe in the Good News, in Mark's understanding of Jesus, is to buy into the notion that healing and forgiveness and love is God's will for all of us. And, as is the case in all the New Testament, belief is not simply mental assent to a concept. Believing in the Good News means modeling one's life after Jesus, living as one who is being healed, who is being forgiven, who is being loved by the Creator of All. Believing in the Good News, as we know from Matthew's Gospel, means caring for those who are naked and hungry and thirsty — after the levees break, perhaps. Believing in the Good News means sharing all we have with our sisters and brothers, maybe cutting our hours so that they can keep their jobs. Believing in the Good News means, as in the case of Peter and Andrew and James and John, jumping up and leaving everything we think we know behind, all for the sake of following Jesus, even to the cross.

Believing in the Good News means adopting a new life style, the life style of Jesus, and making it the very core of our existence. It is an everyday, all the time kind of endeavor. I would suggest to you that repentance is similar. We've all read and heard and seen those stories of men and women who make sudden dramatic changes in their lives, turning from the most base and degrading lifestyles to faithfulness to Jesus' call in one miraculous step. I believe those stories are true from some but I don't believe they are true for most of us. For most of us, I think that repentance, like following, is an everyday kind of thing. As I move through my life, I am continually being caught up short by new realizations of ways in which my life does not meet the standard of Jesus. Or I realize that I have fallen into the same old destructive patterns again and again. I am responsible for my own actions. I must repent – reorient myself to the Way of Jesus. But that doesn't mean that I walk around fearful of God's wrath or mentally donning the sackcloth and ashes of mourning. For as Paul wrote to the Romans, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Living a life of continual repentance doesn't make me miserable – it makes me glad that God loves me enough to be faithful in loving me despite my continual need to reset my life's course.

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But the funny thing about taking responsibility for my own life is that it means that I don't have anyone else to blame if I don't change in the ways I know I should. It means I don't have any excuses for wallowing around in my own peculiar kinds of brokenness. It means that once I see where my path has strayed from the path of Jesus, I need to make immediate course corrections. The Ninevites heard Jonah's message and changed their lives immediately. Those Galilean fishermen heard the call of Jesus to follow him and "immediately they left their nets." It was the responsible thing to do. We must be ready to do the same when the call of Jesus enters our lives.

And now, as I warned you, I'm going to get a little old-fashioned-Baptist on you. I've got a question for you. What is Jesus calling you to do today? When you look at your life, the way you live, the way you think, the way you spend, what do you need to change in order to make your life more like the life of Jesus? What do you need to turn away from in order to turn towards God? I'm not going to ask anybody to walk the aisle today but I do call you to individual responsibility and to repentance – not the old sackcloth and ashes repentance, but a willingness to turn towards God, knowing full well that God waits for you with loving arms and a parent's pleasure in the love of their child. As we sing our final song this morning, check in with yourself. Are you willing, wherever Christ leads, to go with him; to follow the one who loves you so, no matter where he leads? Are you ready to make the change that you believe in?