

January 21, 2024
The Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:14-20
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Even Debbie John?

I don't know who she is. The annoying blonde woman with the whiny, spacy voice sitting at a table in what looks like a diner in the Discover Debit commercial that has been making the rounds lately.

She needs to pay her bill, but she's taking her sweet time with it, holding up her server, completely unaware of his need, probably to attend to his other tables, while she babbles about how special he makes her feel and then how special it makes her feel that her Discover Debit card pays her cash back on her purchases.

At that point the server informs her that everyone who has Discover Debit gets cash back on their purchases. The message, in other words, is "You're not that special."

I'm sure that the internet could have told me who this woman is, but I prefer not to know, because I just like to call her Jonah.

Every once in a while, a commercial comes along that I just can't look away from no matter how cringy it is, because, whether it means to be or not, and it probably doesn't, it's making a theological point that makes me think, "Hmmm. That'll preach."

So far, in the commercial we just have this squeaky-voiced, self-absorbed, blind to the people around her woman babbling about how special things make her feel, learning that a perk offered to her is offered to everyone. Nothing particularly theological about that.

But then she starts a ruminating on a childhood acquaintance, asking in bewilderment, "Even Debbie John gets is?"

Apparently, Debbie John stole the woman's bike when she was a child and hid it in her garage, while the woman went on a fruitless search through her neighborhood, looking for her bike. The impression you get is that years later the bike was discovered in the deceptive Debbie's garage.

And the woman, who I'm calling Jonah, is flabbergasted to learn that that even Debbie, even deceptive, duplicitous Debbie, can get cash back on her Discover Debit purchases.

Yes, even she gets the perk. Now, would the woman please pay her bill. Please?

That part never gets resolved. The woman is lost in her puzzlement about the grace extended to her erring childhood acquaintance and the scene fades to black.

It's an annoying commercial making an interesting theological point.

It's similar to the point that is made by the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who, when the Lord said, "Follow me" or, in the exact words of the book of Jonah, "'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me,'" (Jonah 1:2) took off and hopped on a boat heading in the opposite direction. The Lord said, "Follow me" and Jonah said, "Nope" and ran.

A cat and mouse story ensues between God and Jonah, with God being the cat and Jonah being the mouse, and it only ends when God has Jonah cornered in the belly of a large fish.

Finally, Jonah relents and is spewed out on dry land where, as we learn in our Old Testament reading for today, God calls Jonah again, saying, "Follow me" or, in the exact words of our Old Testament reading, "'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'" (Jonah 3:2).

So, Jonah goes and preaches to a third of the city, going a day's walk through a city that was a three days' walk across.

In other words, Jonah does the bare minimum of what had been commanded by God, proclaiming God's warning to the city, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4b)

There. Done. Mission accomplished. They've been warned. "Happy now, God?"

If you don't read the whole story, you might think you know why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, an empire that threatened the nation of Israel. They were powerful and dangerous enemies and ultimately conquered and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. It's understandable why Jonah wouldn't want to go there.

It was not safe to go to the city of his people's enemies, to go to the heart of their empire, to out himself as an Israelite, and to speak the word of the Lord in a city full of idols, to a people who bowed to and believed in other gods.

But none of that is why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.

Our Old Testament reading for today tells us what happens after Jonah preaches his half-hearted sermon. The people of Nineveh repented of their sins and, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." (Jonah 3:10).

And that is a problem. At least for Jonah. Because that's why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.

Our reading for today doesn't tell us why Jonah didn't want to listen when God said, "Follow me," or, more specifically, "'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me,'" (Jonah 1:2) but if you keep reading, you get the rest of the story.

The last verse in our reading for today is the last verse of chapter 3 of Jonah. The next verses in Jonah, the first three verses of chapter four say this:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' (Jonah 4:1-3)

Jonah wasn't afraid of the Ninevites and what they might do to him if they found him, an Israelite, in their city. Jonah was afraid of God and God's generosity, God's mercy. Jonah was afraid that exactly what did happen would happen. Jonah was afraid that the Ninevites would repent and God would forgive.

And that's why I called the woman in the commercial Jonah. Because she could not believe that the Discover card perks could be for her childhood enemy as well as for her.

In the theology of capitalism, those perks were grace and she was mystified that the perks, the "grace" could be extended to her enemy as well as to herself (assuming, also in the theology of capitalism, that they could both afford it.).

Jonah actually gets a little bit more credit for knowing the God he worshiped than the woman in the commercial gets for understanding how corporations worked, because Jonah knew that God was merciful, that God's grace could be expected. And he didn't want that grace to be poured out on his enemy.

I wonder if those first disciples, those fishermen down by the Sea of Galilee, knew what they were getting into when Jesus came to them and said, "Follow me."

I wonder if they thought about what might happen before they dropped their nets, left their boats, left their families and followed.

I wonder if they could have ever imagined all of the forgiving they would have to do, 70 times 7. I wondered if they imagined the foot washing they would

have to do. I wonder if they imagined the people they would have to feed, the strangers they would have to love, the lines they would have to cross between us and them. I wonder if they imagined the enemies they would have to call brother, call sister. I wonder if they thought about how much they would have to leave behind, how many old ways, old convictions, old words, old ways of living, they would have to walk away from in order to keep on following.

Jonah knew well enough what following God could get you, enemies forgiven and God's mercy poured out way beyond your own borders and boundaries.

But Andrew and Simon, who later became Peter, and James and John, I wonder how much they knew, how much they could imagine about what would happen next; about how their lives would change?

And I wonder if they would have followed if they had known. Known the whole story, like we do. Of course, we don't know our own story, at least not the whole of it, but we do know theirs.

The miracles that they got to see, the roads they had to walk, and the way that their faith was challenged by God's grace that went way farther than they could have ever imagined.

But maybe I'm not giving them enough credit. Maybe they did know, at least a little bit. We don't know exactly what they knew about Jesus, that made them follow when he called, but what we do know is what Jesus' message was, what he came to Galilee proclaiming.

Our gospel reading for today tells us, that he was proclaiming the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

And maybe they were ready for that good news, ready for the hope of the kingdom of God drawn near to the world. Maybe they were ready for an economy of grace. Maybe they were ready for a world in which repentance and forgiveness

flowed. Maybe they were ready to look beyond their nets, ready for a different calling. Maybe they were ready for a world in which enemies, even their enemies, even for the Debbie Johns of the world, could be forgiven. Maybe they were ready to see what God could do in the world, with a few fishermen, who didn't flee, but followed.

And maybe we're ready too. Because the kingdom of God is at hand. God's mercy, God's grace is real, for us, for our neighbors, for our enemies. And Jesus says, "Follow me." Amen.