

Epiphany 3B –Mark and Jonah
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Trinity Church Lime Rock
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Jesus speaks! Our reading from the Gospel of Mark is one to remember for the whole of our Year of Mark. Verse 14 and 15, at the beginning of our passage, are the first words Jesus speaks in this Gospel, and he recalls the words that John said at the Jordan River, and the words that the prophet Isaiah said long before that. These are ancient, historic words. They are the refrain for the entire Gospel. We hear that John was arrested, it is a mirror image of the time in the not so distant future when Jesus will be arrested and delivered up to die. The phrase, "The time is fulfilled" is repeated too at the end of the Gospel.

And I feel like I've heard these words a hundred times, "**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**"

And, here's what I have thought in the past in my head when I hear those words; "It is time to see that God is always right. I'm always wrong. I need to say I'm sorry for the bad things I've done, believe in the words of the creed, and be a better person so that I can get into heaven when the time comes.

It seems odd, but my experience as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous has helped me see that I had thought too simplistically and negatively. Some of my ways of looking at the words, "repent", "believe" and "good news", were all tied up with what I had been told many years ago. Jesus wants us to repent alright, and the first thing I had to repent of was always looking at things in the same old way. Jonah helps with that too....I'll get to him in a couple of minutes.

The genius of Bill W. and Dr. Bob (those founders of AA) was that they had a mature and well thought out way of seeing these concepts, and all the words of Jesus. I think that's what the Oxford Group had done for them.

What Jesus was trying to get us to see, and what the AA 12 steps teaches too, is that for God to really reign in over our lives we have to change. We have to change the way we think, change how we respond to outside stimuli, and change what we expect life to be for us here and now. Jesus is asking us to change (look at things differently) and to believe which is to trust in something and someone other than ourselves. The good news is that new life is possible through Christ, not through our own sheer will-power. We covered that last week when we talked about steps one, two and three.

Another way of thinking about the first three steps is, 1) I can't 2) God can and 3) I think I'll let Him.

So, here we are on a Sunday where Jesus says repent, or wake up and see something differently, and we come to the AA steps 4 and 5 which are the beginning steps which prepare us for radical change.

Step 4: Made a searching and **fearless** moral inventory of ourselves. And step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

The fearless part is hard. It's an unpleasant thing to do, to send a searchlight over our lives, especially those parts we are not so proud of, and write those things down in preparation for telling them to God and to another human being. The point of this important exercise is not to beat ourselves up about the things we have done wrong in

our lives, but to see how patterns have developed, and to see that we all have character flaws which cause us repeated trouble. We may feel that we haven't been so bad as all that; perhaps we have not robbed anyone, or assaulted anyone. But we are human, so we have flaws, even if they are just in the minor forms of tardiness, or a few too many desserts, or a little white lie now and then.

When we become willing to write all these things down, and tell someone else about them, then they no longer have power over us. We can imagine beginning to change. Take our friend Jonah. He had to have a change of heart in order to do what God was asking of him and it sure wasn't easy. Just like the story we heard last week of Samuel, we only hear a very small bit of the tale of Jonah. If you want to read this very short book it is found on page 844 of your pew Bible.

Of course, Jonah is famous. When God calls him to do a job, he runs away. He gets on a ship to Tarshish, to go as far as Nineveh as he can. Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria. And the Assyrians were the evil empire of the day, and the mortal enemies of the Israelites. They were ruthless warriors who tortured their captives. So, we can understand why Jonah ran. He didn't want to face himself, and he didn't want to face God who knew that he was being a coward. We don't get to hear the part of the story where Jonah gets tossed off of the ship, and ends up in the belly of a fish. He's the only prophet (that we know of) that had to be called two times. But after the time in the fish, he becomes a changed man, sort of. He finally listens to God, and goes to Nineveh. And, unbelievably, the people listen to him! They believed Jonah, they repented and put on sackcloth. They even dressed their animals in sackcloth, so the story goes. BTW, there is nothing in the history written about that time that would indicate that the people of Assyria ever did change their violent, warring ways.

Unfortunately, we don't get to hear today the funny end of the story. Jonah is not happy that the people of Nineveh did what God told them and then were saved from destruction. Jonah wanted to see God destroy the city for all the sins that the people had committed. In the last scene of the story Jonah is pouting and he sits under a dead bush outside of the city. He wanted them to get their comeuppance.

But we can't be too hard on Jonah. He needs to change his way of thinking if he's going to have any peace of mind in this prophecy business. He's more like us that you might think. It is much easier for us to spot the faults of another person than it is to identify our own faults. We can think of quite a few other people who should do a good step 4 and 5. Can we be as merciful to someone else as we pray God will be to us? This change business isn't easy!

Jesus asks Peter and Andrew, James and John to follow him. We don't know what conversations they may have had with Jesus before this scene. But they made the decision to give up the only way they've ever known of living. This Jesus makes the disciples, and us, a promise of a new life and a future that we didn't know existed. The question is, can we imagine changing, with God's help, enough to be able to grab hold of that life that Jesus offers. It would mean giving up on anger and resentments like those Jonah held, what do you think? Is this possible? Worth doing? Is it worth letting go and letting God?