

## Weekly Reading – Monday, January 19, 2009

We're now looking at the lessons for Sunday, January 25, 2009, or the third Sunday after Epiphany. The gospel reading, after a short detour into the Gospel of John last week, returns to the Gospel of the year, Mark, and Mark's rendering of the call of the first disciples. But first . . . Jonah.

Jonah 3: 1 - 10

If "call" or vocation is the theme (as it has been for three weeks now) Jonah is a great study. He's the prophet who fled from the call of God, heading in precisely the opposite direction of his God appointed vocation and audience in Nineveh. The opening lines of today's lesson, "Now for a second time," references quite a lot of action, namely, Jonah's attempt to elude God's call, then a storm at sea, followed by Jonah's time out in the belly of the whale and his disgorgement upon dry land. So, in a sense, the opening lines of the chapter read, "Okay, Jonah, read to listen now?" Surprise, Jonah is paying attention! And it's off to Nineveh, where Jonah proclaims the word which the Lord has told him to speak. For consequential sermons this one of Jonah's must set some kind of record and sure makes me envious. Jonah proclaims, "Repent," and all the Ninevites do, from the king to the kiddies. And more, God repents of the judgment he had planned and forgives the Ninevites wholly. This is the real reason that Jonah had run away in the first place. He was afraid that God would forgive the no-good Ninevites and Jonah really preferred the fire and brimstone alternative. The story raises the question of the offensiveness of grace and forgiveness, of God's capacity to forgive those we cannot, and how we feel when someone we don't think deserves it gets a whole new, fresh start from God. For how Jonah handles it, read on through Chapter 4.

I Corinthians 7: 29 -31

If you want to understand what "an eschatological perspective" might be, this is the text. Brothers, writes Paul, the time has grown short. We tend to hear that in quantitative terms, that is, there aren't many days left before the end of history or before Christ's return. Some who read it this way will dismiss the entire text concluding its meaning is voided for it is no longer relevant but is simply an example of early Christian end-time expectation. Au contraire, instead of looking at the text only in temporal terms, i.e. "there aren't many days left," look at it in a broader spiritual and eschatological sense. There is a new creation hovering over and in the midst of daily and on-going life, another dimension. It is the realm of God's reign, of a new age, of unspeakable (ask Jonah) grace breaking into our midst (as it broke into Jonah's with God's grace to the Ninevites) which changes everything. In light of this, let those who have wives be as those they had none, those who mourn be as though not, and so on. That means that there is another dimension, another reality which dislocates us from this present order and its preoccupations and locates us anew in God's realm and reign where all things are being made new. Those of a mind to do so could make some connections to Buddhist teachings against being overly attached to this world or our identity in it.

Mark 1: 14 - 20

Paul's "the time is short" becomes in Mark and with Jesus' presence and proclamation, "The time is fulfilled." The moment is now, the reign of God is here, passing by, come follow me. It is an intrusion into the world of those four fisherman, and just as surely into our own world, of God's word. The challenge before the preacher is to announce this word as the present word in our time, in our lives, in our churches. "Now, is the time, come and follow me." Often preachers get off track, in my view, on this text by attempting to look at psychologically or from the perspective of the first disciples. We wonder what kind of special guy Jesus was? What was his charisma? Or we speculate about Peter and Andrew, James and John. Gosh they must have been men of tremendous faith! No. It's not about them. It's about the word of God, the moment of truth, which asks us the ultimate question and makes the ultimate claim: Follow me. And leaving all else behind, they followed him. In many congregations today we seem no longer to be able to quite imagine it possible that such a question and challenge might be put to us, and so we ramble on, meander on, for more weeks, then years, never hearing the central claim and call of Christ to us today. "Come Holy Spirit, break us open and make us new." The preacher's task is to prepare in such a way, that this word of Christ can be spoken to us now as directly and freshly as it was spoken to them then, and then to point to what it might mean to us to "leave all things behind and follow him," in our context.