

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 B

On this Sunday of the Word of God, we hear that ***“Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord’s bidding.”*** That sounds like admirable and prompt obedience to the Lord’s Word – unless you know the rest of the story. In fact, Jonah was a rather uncooperative prophet. It was his fleeing from the Lord’s bidding the first time that started a chain of events: storm that threatened their ship, that led the sailors to cast lots to see who was responsible, that led to Jonah admitting his guilt, that led him to be thrown overboard to calm the waters, that led to the large fish that swallowed Jonah – if you followed all that. But per the story, ***Jonah is swallowed up, not to punish him, but in the end, to save him from drowning.*** Jonah prays for deliverance and the fish casts him back on shore; and then God sends him again to Nineveh. This time, perhaps now aware that God meant business, Jonah goes.

As we hear, Jonah is amazingly successful in his preaching – the people repent as soon as they hear the Word of God. But though he brings the message, Jonah himself doesn’t like it. In the section following this passage, Jonah complains about all his sufferings and his difficult journey; and here these people simply change and who wants to serve such a merciful God who just forgives rather than vanquishes His enemies? The four short chapters of the Book of Jonah contain many lessons, but the Book revolves around God’s mercy, the God Whose Word brings Second Chances. ***God desires to overcome by conversion, by changing hearts, not by destroying lives ...*** a truth that is foreshadowed with Jonah and announced by Christ but only fully revealed in His Cross and Resurrection.

However one interprets the whale in the Book of Jonah, it can certainly stand for many things in our own lives ... where we end up swallowed up by things beyond our control. It might be illness, or anxiety, or personal conflicts. It might be work or the demands of our responsibilities. It might be our hobbies or distractions that take up an inordinate amount of our time and resources. It might be our prejudices or fears or hurts in the past that keep us from trust or compassion for others. It might be the social media and websites that alarm and inflame us, rather than deepen our spiritual lives. But like Jonah’s eventual trip to

Nineveh, the very call to repentance is not about condemnation, but opportunity. Conversion is not so much about our failures, but about our freedom ... *that change is possible; that our past is not necessarily our future; that what has happened to us, or choices we have made, does not define our identity*. We are affected by our experiences, but not determined by them. The invitation to repent assures us that God does not give up on us, that we can have a new beginning, another chance.

This past Friday we marked 48 years of legalized abortion in the U.S., the loss of well over 60 million lives before birth, a loss that affects us all. But though we struggle to create true reverence for life in an increasingly divided and harsh world, faith allows us to trust that in God's time, that call to conversion to the Gospel of Life will bear fruit, as did the preaching of Jonah. At the core of the Gospel and even the call to repentance is *the fundamental fact that God has given each person the gift of life. He speaks the Word of creation – Let there be LIFE ... and that life begins to last forever*. As Jesus was enshrined under the heart of Mary for nine months and cherished as her Son and her Lord, so we are called to recognize the divine image in every child in the womb and throughout their span of years. *For God still works by changing hearts, not by destroying lives*.

Remember that in the Book of Jonah, it is God Who sends the whale ... what seemed like a further disaster for Jonah was in fact a step in his conversion. Spend some time in prayer and reflection this week about those things that seem to overwhelm, and *ask God to help you understand how to function well as a disciple in a dysfunctional world*. The God Whose Word brings Second Chances invites us to freedom as we too hear the voice of Jesus: *“Come, follow Me.”*