

“Popular Prejudice” Part 2
“Reality Is Invaded”
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January 25, 2015

The Old Testament lesson for today is taken from the book of Jonah, chapter 3, verses 1 through 5 and verse 10. And then from the gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 14 through 20. I’ll be reading from the Common English Bible. The Lord’s word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.”

And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord’s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days’ walk across.) Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

Now . . . the gospel lesson from Mark 1, verses 14 through 20. After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” As Jesus passed alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.”

Right away, they left their nets and followed him. After going a little farther, he saw James and John, Zebedee’s sons, in their boat repairing the fishing nets. At that very moment he called them. They followed him, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired workers. This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray. God bless the reading, hearing, and understanding of your word

today. Teach us that we are all apostles of Christ—those who are sent forth to bring others to God. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

When God makes himself known to us our reality is truly invaded. The intrusion is disruptive and changes our lifestyle. One way or another, our lives will be readjusted and modified. God requires a response from us. Both readings in the O.T. and N.T. converge. When God comes makes himself known to us—a response is required.

Let me give you some history surrounding the book of Jonah. The city of Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. After the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B. C., they carried away thousands of Israelites and resettled them throughout their empire.

The Israelites hated the Assyrians to the core. They were more cruel and brutal in their terrorist violence than any other nation. They would bury their prisoners in the sand alive. They would skin their enemies alive and cut off parts of their body. They’d pull out tongues and make exhibitions of human skulls to strike horror in the surrounding nations. They were a world empire for about 300 years. Now, you can imagine why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. Yep, Jonah was prejudiced. You got it right. He’d seen all the terrible sufferings his people had been through because of the Assyrian’s horrific war tactics.

Jonah refused to go to that great city Nineveh. Instead of going east Jonah went west. He jumped on a ship headed for Tarshish and ran away from the presence of the Lord, ha ha We know that no one can run away from the presence of the Lord. Well, going east when the Lord said to go west didn’t work. The Lord made a big storm on the sea, and the men on the ship threw Jonah overboard in hopes of saving their lives. They knew Jonah was a man on the run from God. It was then that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and sat in stinky,

slobbery fish blubber for 3 days and nights. Jonah didn't like that either, so he started praying. The Lord heard his prayer, and the great fish spit him out on land.

Then the Lord called Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, and Jonah went. He didn't want to, but he went. Scripture tells us that Jonah knew the Lord to be a “. . . gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . .” Jonah knew that if he did go and preach to the Ninevites—they just might listen—and listen they did. Jonah preached the shortest sermon ever recorded. “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” Well, the Ninevites believed God. They fasted, turned from their wicked ways, and God changed his mind from destroying them.

We can see that Jonah's reality has been invaded big time. Jonah knew God to be a God of mercy and that God loves ALL people, but he was still hoping his prejudice might carry some weight. The Assyrians were merciless—but they changed. They turned. Jonah thought that God's mercy that was limited to himself and to the Jewish people. He didn't feel the Assyrians were worthy to receive God's mercy, but Jonah was deceived.

And that's the challenge with being prejudiced, we think whoever it is we're feeling merciless for deserves God's worst. So the end result is this. Jonah does God's will, but walks away mad. He's obedient to God, but his heart isn't changed. The Assyrians were certainly changed and converted, but not Jonah who had what we might call a popular prejudice. Where did Jonah's bad attitude get him? Nowhere—God still did what he wanted.

The opposite response to following God is seen in the disciple's calling. Jesus comes to Galilee, announces the good news, and calls 2 sets of brothers—Simon and Andrew and James and John. They drop what they're doing

immediately and follow Jesus to catch some people. Now of course their reality is abruptly invaded just like Jonah. The fishing brothers left everything behind .

The two lectionary texts we looked at are sharp contrasts in attitudes. The people involved end up doing what God wants, but Jonah walks away angry and the disciples find lives that are centered in the will of God. There were times that the disciples had to work through their prejudice, but they eventually got on God's side and agreed with him. God calls us to love all people. God didn't come to be the Savior of just the Jewish race. God, through the work of Christ, came for everyone. Christians must let go of their bias and prejudice.

We're to imitate God in our treatment of others. When we allow our biased attitude and prejudice to get in our way we get angry and stay angry. Anger doesn't work the righteousness of God—all it does is hurt us. If we want to affect the hearts of others we must first allow God to change our heart. It's possible to obey God with a rotten attitude, and God may even bless our obedience, but Jonah was miserable. God wants us to do more than just obey outwardly; his desire is that our heart would be changed from one of hatred to love.

When Jesus came into Galilee he preached the Good News saying, "Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" That's what it's about—changing our hearts and lives. The good news is that we *can* allow God to change our hearts, but we've got to see our need to change. We've got to acknowledge our prejudice.

The people of Ninevah did change. Scripture said "They turned from their evil ways"—they repented. They changed their heart and lives. The call of Christ is to be life changing. It's a power that continues throughout our lives; it's not just a one-time occurrence at baptism. It's a continual process whereby our heart and lives are changed from the moment we meet Christ to the moment we take our last

earthly breath. Christians are called to love their neighbor as they love themselves. We're called to feed the hungry and house the homeless, and to give to mission.

My take on the two lectionary scriptures is this. Let's examine our attitudes. Do we entertain prejudiced thinking and behavior? If we do, we're called to turn from that thinking and change. We can't love as God loves by harboring prejudice. Let's pray. God who loves all people, work in us this moment. Show us now if we do harbor bias and prejudice. Help us not to make excuses to deceive ourselves. Move us to be honest in our thinking, and if we don't know if we're prejudiced, show us. Show us this week, and then help us to pursue the dropping off of that wrong and hurtful attitude. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.