

Sermon for 1/22/12  
Epiphany 3B

There's a song I learned at a youth event about fifteen years ago, called "Subtle as a Truck." You've probably never heard the song before, and after I share its lyrics today, you'll probably never hear it again. My understanding is that it was written by a youth leader at a mainline church in the Midwest who taught it to his youth and it somehow made its way beyond just the youth group. We would sing it at diocesan youth events in Southern Ohio, and I my wife is familiar with it from West Virginia too. The song has three verses which each talk about a different story in the Old Testament: first Noah, then Moses, and thirdly Jonah. And then the refrain talks about how not-so-subtle God can be at times. I want to share with you the third verse, about Jonah, whom we heard about in our first reading today.

The verse goes: Let's talk about Jonah/In the belly of a fish/God said, "Go"/Jonah said, "No"/ So God sent a fish/To swallow him whole/And burped him up in Nineveh/Where Jonah yelled, "You Sinewahs!" (sinners)/And they said, "Wow!/I guess we'll repent now!"

Then the song's refrain goes: Oh, Lord, that's subtle/Subtle as a truck/Driving at your face/Crashing through your door/It's hard to ignore/Oh, Lord, that's subtle/Subtle as a truck.

Now, as you can tell, it's kind of an odd song with silly lyrics. That's of course why it had an appeal to teenagers at youth events. But I want to focus on three aspects of this song and how they relate both to the readings we have this week and to God's call and work in our own lives.

First, I want to think about what it's like to be called by God. Second, I want to think about how we each react to God's call. And third, I want to think about how God acts through us despite our failings and inadequacies.

As we think about the story of Jonah both told in the song verse I shared and in the reading we heard this morning, we get a picture of what God's calling in one instance looked like, and how that called was acted upon. Now, the verse from this song relates for us the basic story of Jonah. However, there's a little bit more to Jonah's story that I'd like to share. And I feel that's worth mentioning today, as our lectionary doesn't give us much more from the book of Jonah during our three-year cycle of readings. Jonah, in fact, is quite a humorous book, and it tells a very funny and interesting story if you read it closely. If you haven't read it in a while, I commend it to you. But what I like about the story of Jonah is the fact that we all can relate to his character in some way, even if not to the exact events he endures.

Jonah receives a call from God to do something—in his case, to go tell the non-believing people of the city of Nineveh to repent. And what does Jonah do, but the exact opposite. He ignores God's call to him, finds a ship going to Tarshish in the opposite direction and gets on board. When God sends a mighty storm on the sea, the ship's crew prays to each of their gods to save them while Jonah lies fast asleep. Finally the crew cast lots and determine that the problem is Jonah and to calm the storm he tells them to throw him overboard.

But instead of drowning, God sends a big fish, possibly a whale, to swallow up Jonah. Jonah stays in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights praying to God, until it vomits him up on dry land. And then we pick up with our reading from today: God calls Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh. And this time, Jonah obeys. He goes to the great non-believing city of Nineveh, so large that it takes three days to walk from end to end. Jonah walks along crying out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And what do the non-believing people of Nineveh do, much to Jonah's surprise and disgust? They believe in God. They proclaim a fast, and everyone great and small puts on sackcloth.

Now, unfortunately, our lectionary does us a disservice here. It cuts out four verses in the middle of the story, of what's already a short passage from a short book that again we don't read much in our lectionary to begin with it. So, if you will, I want to read those four verses to you.

"When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (Jonah 3:6-9) And then verse ten as we heard notes that "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."

*The Rev. Brian W. Turner  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA  
Sermon for 1/22/12 Epiphany 3B  
[1]*

Now you can hear some of the humor of the story, if you haven't caught it in other parts. The king decrees that even the animals shall be covered with sackcloth as a sign of repentance. And the thing to remember and which makes the story a little absurd or at least hard to believe—both for us and for Jonah—is that the people of Nineveh are non-believers, who don't even know of God, that is, the God of the Hebrews, in the first place. And yet they still repent.

But, lest I digress on what is indeed a neat and interesting story, I want to return to the three points we are invited to take away from this reading.

First, we have a chance to reflect on what it's like to be called by God. For indeed, I do believe that we each have been and continue to be called by God. I don't believe any of you would be here today if that weren't the case. Somehow God initially got your attention and led you in the direction of the church. Perhaps it was through a friend or parent or other family member. Maybe it was through a song or a story or a piece of scripture. Maybe it was through a prayer or a sign or a still small voice like a whisper. It could have come in a word as it did to Jonah, or in a dream, like it did for Joseph. Or like the disciples Simon, Andrew, James, and John in our gospel reading today, it could have come from the voice of Jesus himself. Perhaps it was as subtle as a light wind, or rather as the song I shared earlier says, "subtle as a truck." Either way, we each have been called to the church and its ministry, each in our own way, and we have answered that call most recently by being present here today, by being active in this community of faith, and by worshiping and partaking in the Eucharist which we do here on a weekly basis.

Secondly, we have a chance to reflect on how we've each reacted to God's call in our lives. And while, as I've said, I think we've each reacted today by being present here, I wonder what our initial reactions were like. Were we hesitant like Moses, feeling inadequate and unprepared? Were we terrified and troubled like Jonah, running in the complete and opposite direction, begging to be thrown into the sea rather than obey a calling we felt too hard, until at rock bottom we finally prayed to God to save us and he gave us a second chance and a second calling? Were we like Noah, whom God told to build an ark because he was going to flood the earth, and then to gather all the animals in pairs to live with him and his family on that ark for forty days and forty nights, and despite the absurdity of such a request set to work building that ark and gathering those animals? Or were we like the disciples Simon and Andrew and James and John, in the midst of casting and mending our nets, in the drudgery of our daily work and yet our only livelihood, the only means we had of caring for self and family, and in the instant of Jesus' calling to us, we immediately got up and left our nets or our father Zebedee and followed Jesus' call? Was our reaction immediate obedience or immediate fear? Has our journey to God taken years of twists and turns and nights of sorrow in the belly of a fish, or has it been a straight and steady walk forward?—this journey which we are still on... Has it been as subtle as a snail or as subtle as a truck?

And finally, thirdly, we have a chance to reflect on how God has acted through us, despite our misgivings and failings and inadequacies. Like Moses who couldn't speak eloquently, yet who saved God's people from the oppression of Pharaoh and led them through the Red Sea to the promised land. Like Noah who was an alcoholic, yet saved his family and all the animals from the great flood that destroyed the earth. Like Jonah who resisted and ran from God every step of the way, yet saved the people of Nineveh from utter destruction. Like Simon Peter who was impetuous, obstinate, and denied his Lord Jesus Christ three times, yet also affirmed him as Messiah and became the rock upon which the church was built. How has God nevertheless acted through each one of us with our own imperfections to advance his gospel and bring others to Christ, both in subtle and not so subtle ways?

In the story of Jonah and in so many others recounted in the scriptures, we have a chance to see ourselves, to see our own callings. We have a chance to reflect and remember and remind ourselves of how God has indeed been working in our lives. And not only that, how we have responded, both by coming here today and by going back out into the world to share our lives and God's love with one another. We may not all get up and preach in a pulpit each week, and yet we all have a gospel to share and a calling from God to be lived out. As we remember the humanity of Jonah and how God worked through him despite his resistance and failings, may we also remember how God continues to work through our own imperfect lives. May we continue to answer that call from God, to do his work in the world, and to spread his gospel among all whom we meet, so that God's love may be made known to all as subtly as a truck.