

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Epiphany 3, Year B, January 25, 2009, Jonah, 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14, I Corinthians 7: 29-31, Mark 1: 14-20

+In the Name of God who calls us to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. Amen.

An old friend and retired priest sent me a brief e-mail this week. As he looked at the scripture readings for today, he reflected on the hard economic times and the new political administration. My friend said he felt these brief, pointed lessons called for a sermon on decision/commitment/all or nothing. I wrote him saying that on top of the issues facing the nation I was preaching to a congregation in an historic church located in the city of Detroit having its annual meeting in the midst of financial challenges and poised to call its next rector. I felt decision/commitment/all or nothing seemed to sum it up.

God called old Jonah to make a decision and answer God's call to go preach repentance to the great imperial city of Ninevah. Jonah didn't want to go and that's how he ended up running away on a ship and finally in the belly of the whale. But the Lord came to Jonah a second time with the same call requiring both decision and commitment. God said, "Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

We could hang that verse right above the altar, on the front of the church and put it on a bumper sticker. "Get up, go to Detroit, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." It is time to make decisions, renew our commitment to God's mission. It's an all or nothing time for our church and the greater community.

Commitment and decision begin right here where we are. We don't wait for the diocesan office or on decisions made in Washington. All renewal is local. Jonah walked into the middle of Ninevah and got to work.

Jesus began his mission in Galilee down along the seashore. He called Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, to make a decision, a commitment. It was all or nothing. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Unlikely as it sounds to most of us, Peter and Andrew left their fishing business and followed the man with the message. The same thing when Jesus called James and John to make a decision, a commitment. They left their father and the family business and followed the One who said, "The Kingdom of God has come near." It was all or nothing.

The message of Jonah and of Mark's Gospel is clear. God has called us. We are asked to make a commitment to the mission of God. We are summoned to make a decision. The times alone make this unmistakable. Nothing is or will be the same. And choosing the status quo is making a decision for slow decline. Renewal comes from vision, commitment and decisive action. And all renewal begins right here and right now.

The annual meeting is always a moment for a parish to emphasize commitment. We elect a new class to the Vestry, our decision making body. We look over the level of financial giving. We review the various ministries of the congregation. This annual meeting, however, is not the yearly formality it sometimes can be. Christ Church is fully aware that funding the mission is an urgent priority. We can't keep doing things the same old way and hope to stay vital. The pressures of the economic situation cast their weight on us. The great needs of the city and the region stare us in the face. And we are enthusiastically ready to call the next rector to be our priest, pastor and leader.

I believe this is God's moment, the moment when things come together. Events, signs, pointers and facts fuse into one single moment. We can't escape the direction of God's leading. God says now is the time for a renewed commitment to mission and ministry. God proclaims

that the beauty of his house should shine in the lives of its inhabitants. God calls us to make real that the Kingdom of God has come near.

We can use the hard numbers of deficits and long lists of needs to stir in us a decision for God's work. We can look about us, at young and old, and say that we will not falter in our commitment to the nurture of souls. We can see those out of work and those living on the margin and declare we have a God-given work of justice to do.

Jonah was no starry eyed idealist when God spoke to him. He was a rather cowardly cynic. He never did quite get over his anger at having been called in the first place. But, you know, in the end he made the decision. He committed himself to the mission of God and through Jonah God's message prospered in the great city.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were not anything more than village fishermen, working hard at making a living. When the call came they committed themselves to Jesus and the message of the Kingdom of God. It was all or nothing.

So many people of such great diversity make up Christ Church. You form its personality. Not everyone here is an easy and willing servant. Not everyone is a professional doctor or lawyer or chief of high finance. Not everyone is rich or even middle income. We are a mix of folks called by God to be a part of Christ's Body in this place. This call comes to us as a body not just as isolated individuals.

At this moment of decision and commitment, we make it as one. Sure, this depends on many individual acts of commitment, but it adds up to one parish community deciding that what the Kingdom of God means will be real and effective right here and right now.