

Year B\*Epiphany 3\*2009\*Jonah and Mark  
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The Bible is alive with food for my soul today. This morning we read from my favorite two books of the Bible.

The Old Testament book of Jonah and the Gospel of Mark. This is the year of Mark. His symbol in tradition is the Lion. Our pulpit hanging features a lion from the Book of Kells, an ancient illuminated Bible from Ireland. We'll be hearing a lot from Mark this year.

But first  
Jonah.

Jonah is my favorite book in the Old Testament because it is a grand joke the Israelites told on themselves. And I think to laugh at ourselves is a very good thing.

Here's the joke.

God tells Jonah to go and preach in the streets of Nineveh, the capital of Israel's ancient enemy, Assyria. "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." <sup>1</sup>

But Jonah hops on a ship going as far away from Nineveh as he can get. Why? Because Jonah knows that God is a merciful God, and that if, by some miracle, the people of Nineveh repent, God will forgive them. Jonah does not want his ancient enemy forgiven.

So the prophet runs from the Lord.  
That's the first surprise.

Then there's a storm and something about the belly of a fish, which really has almost nothing to do with the story, though lots of people get hung up here. The fish is really just a sort of divine transit bus which is God's way of getting Jonah to Nineveh. The fish throws Jonah up on the shore and that's where we picked up the story today.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jon 1:1-2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>2</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jon 3:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The word “overthrown” is hardly out of Jonah’s mouth when, to his righteous horror, people start repenting, left and right.

The lectionary folks did us a disservice this morning. It cut short the repentance of Nineveh. It is comic how many and how quickly the people repented. Listen to the full text.

“And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

Everybody in the city fasts!  
Every body puts on the sackcloth!  
Everybody repents!  
The people!  
The king!  
The nobles!  
The dogs!  
The cats!  
The cows!

Can you see the Ninevites trying to get the little sack-cloth suits on their cats? These Ninevites are super-repenters. They are the exact opposite of Jonah. Jonah runs from the word of the Lord, the Ninevites repent at the drop of the prophets first word.

Any Israelite of good will would be snickering at this point. Snickering at themselves.  
Opened by God’s love.  
Opened to mercy.  
Opened by laughter at themselves.

Jonah is the book that gets us laughing at our small mindedness,  
at our stupid religious self-righteousness.  
Laughing at our over-indulged national pride.  
Laughing at our blindness at thinking we have cornered the market on goodness, mercy,  
responsiveness to God.

Jonah is a masterpiece.

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<sup>3</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jon 3:5-9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Jonah is really is the comic version of the life of Jesus.  
Jesus who says it's time for God's way to have its way.  
Jesus says, "The self-righteousness of religious leaders and the might of Roman armies have had their chance and now I am going to show you the mercy and laughter of God which will be going strong long after Israel and Rome are dusty memories in out-of-print books."

The gospel of Mark is my other favorite book in the Bible.  
It too is filled with so many surprises.  
No Christmas.  
No birth stories.  
No genealogies.  
Mark gets right to work. He is so amazed at what the man Jesus did and continued to do he had no time to wonder or care where Jesus came from.

So Mark has no Christmas.  
He has no time for it.  
Jesus hits the stage a full grown adult with a baptism to baptize with,  
teaching to teach,  
signs of power to do,  
the devils to fight,  
a death to die,  
and a resurrection to live into.

Only there is no resurrection in Mark. He is in such a hurry to get people going, get people serving, proclaiming, believing, that he cuts his gospel short before anyone actually sees the risen Lord. It's not that Mark doesn't believe in the risen Lord. It's that he doesn't seem to think seeing the risen Lord is as important as following Jesus.

God is at work.  
Something is happening of such astounding import Mark can't wait to get right to it.

Immediately is Mark's favorite word. In the first chapter of the gospel alone he says;  
the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness,<sup>4</sup>  
immediately they left their nets and followed him,<sup>5</sup>  
immediately on the sabbath, he entered the synagogue and taught,<sup>6</sup>  
immediately in their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>5</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>6</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

immediately his fame spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee,<sup>8</sup>  
immediately coming out of the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew,  
with James and John,<sup>9</sup>  
immediately they told him Simon's mother-in-law was sick,<sup>10</sup>  
immediately the leprosy left a man, and he was made clean,<sup>11</sup>  
After sternly warning Jesus immediately drove him away.<sup>12</sup>

The end of chapter one.

There is an urgency in Mark's gospel that wakes me up and gets me moving,  
gets me believing,  
gets me serving,  
gets me following.

Mark has no time for complex beginnings and drawn out endings.  
For Mark the kingdom is here,  
Jesus is the crisis point,  
we must drop what we're doing and decide to follow him.  
**And immediately they left their nets and followed him.**<sup>13</sup>

It's like the old hymn,  
I have decided to follow Jesus,  
I have decided to follow Jesus,  
I have decided to follow Jesus,  
No turning back, no turning back.  
It seems especially Markan to me,  
Urgent.  
Spare.  
Inspiring.

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<sup>7</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:23). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>8</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>9</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:29). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>10</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:30). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>11</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:42). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>12</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:43). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>13</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The humor of Jonah and the urgency of Mark both seem necessary gifts for our individual spiritual health and the health of humanity.

One to keep us humble.  
One to keep us moving.

Humble in mercy.  
Moving in commitment.

A final thing I love about these two books.  
They both end in a question.

Jonah ends with the prophet sitting on a hillside above Nineveh pouting, angry, sullen. Will he embrace the wideness of God's mercy or stay stuck in his condemnation of others? And of course it invites the question, "Will we?"  
Will we stay stuck, pouting, angry, sullen?  
Will we embrace the wideness of God's mercy?

Mark ends with the women running from the tomb in which Jesus' body no longer lies. They are to tell Jesus' disciples he has left Jerusalem and gone on to Galilee. They are to meet him there. We're told the women are afraid and say nothing to anyone. Will they stay in their fears stuck in Jerusalem or will they break through to the joy and power and life of Jesus and meet him in Galilee?  
Will we stay stuck in whatever sticks us?  
Or will we break through to the joy and power and life of Jesus?  
Will we go and meet him in Galilee?

Though none go with me, still I will follow.  
Though none go with me, still I will follow.  
Though none go with me still I will follow.  
No turning back, no turning back.

