

Jonah 3:1-5; 10

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

“Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are!”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What do children’s games and the United Church of Christ motto have in common? Well, I think if we listen closely, it has everything to do with the message of extravagant welcome and invitation that is the lasting message of both of today’s scripture lessons. God, who loves us more deeply than we can imagine, continues to invite us to follow, and continues to forgive us when we don’t, ever hoping that we might.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. That is a very reassuring message, isn’t it? I think sometimes that people *don’t*

come to church because they think they have to have all their answers clear before they cross the threshold. I have heard from some people that they feel like they shouldn't come to church, because they aren't sure what they believe. To this I would like to respond with words of Fredrick Buechner, who said, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Maybe we can be a little more forgiving of Jonah when we remember the earlier parts of his story, when he went running in the opposite direction when God asked him to go and prophesy in Nineveh. That he ends up in the belly of a whale is what most of us probably remember about him, and not so much how the story gets around to this. This image was so much the most powerful one in the story for me as a child, that to this day, I often confuse the image it raised for me with one from the Disney movie of Pinocchio, where Geppetto and Pinocchio are similarly in the belly of a great fish.

In again smiling to think of this image this week, I realized that there is more in common in this scene than our questions about the literal possibility of a large fish's ability to swallow a boy, let alone an adult male whole. Both stories are about disobedience and eventual redemption. Both stories have a central character who grows in faith—in God's mercy and power in Jonah's case, and in Pinocchio's faith in himself and the Blue Fairy in the second instance.

The book of Jonah is, altogether, a fabulous twisting and turning of disobedience and obedience; of doubt and faith; of responding and of denying. Jonah must have had something on the ball for God to go to him in the first place, mustn't he? Still, he is disobedient, but eventually responds to God's call, and the Ninevites eventually do what God had hoped, and they are spared punishment, even though they had once disobeyed. The story continues in the next chapter with Jonah's anger at the forgiveness God shows them. Hmm . . . What's wrong with this picture? I'm sure that his own rescue was a point of celebration for Jonah, but he doesn't want someone else rescued?

Church can be this way at times. Too often we are seen as a club whose attendance or membership must be exclusive. Guess what, folks: This church has an open door, and it swings both ways. No matter who you are, and no matter

where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here—because God welcomes every person. God made every person and loves each one of us just as we are. Sure, God recognizes that in us there is always room for improvement. We are not so unlike the Ninevites from time to time, doing what we want, even when we know it isn't right; or like Jonah, who walked boldfaced in the opposite direction when God called to him. We are not so unlike Pinocchio, either, maybe not in the length of our noses, but in our need to grow a sturdier conscience. Maybe we can call it a more constant moral compass, with true north being the Gospel we know in Jesus.

So, not all of us respond with the same alacrity that Simon, Andrew, James and John did. We may look reluctantly behind us – at our physical comforts, or at the illusion of safety when the walls around our sensibilities are thick and strong. But we can continue to turn and return to God, because in Jesus Christ there is always the possibility for rebirth and for new growth.

Although I titled this sermon, “come out come out wherever you are,” the phrase I was first remembering from childhood games was “Ollie, Ollie, Oxen Free.” I never knew what in the world this meant, until I looked it up to prepare for this sermon. Sure, we would sometimes call it out, never knowing what the syllables looked like, or even what they were supposed to sound like. Now, I know that they are what became of the following: All Ye, All Ye, Outs In Free. Sure, the people left hiding in a game of Chase in the Dark, or the few survivors in a game of Capture the Flag could return, moving from the position of Out to Home Base; to Freedom. This morning, though, I pray that we might trust in God's always forgiving love; in God's grace. We who are out, do not have to stay away. We do not have to fear God's punishing wrath, because in Jesus Christ, who has called not only Andrew and James, but also *us*, we are forgiven. We are already redeemed. We who have been out, can come in free! So, come out, come out, wherever you are. We are all welcome in Jesus' name. Let us pray:

Oh, God, help each one of us to know our worth, our worthiness to follow you—with our questions and our sureties, with our faith and our doubt. Help us also always to be part of your extravagant welcome, in which we invite us to share in the abundant life you have promised in love. Amen.