



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Epiphany 3, Year B
January 21, 2018

[RCL] Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

In this passage, we hear the second half of Jonah's story. Here, Jonah follows God's call to travel to Nineveh and proclaim God's judgment against the city. The people of Nineveh listen to Jonah, repent of their evil ways, fast, and dress themselves and even their animals in sackcloth and ashes. Seeing their repentance, God relents, sparing them from destruction.

Earlier, of course, Jonah had refused the call to go to Nineveh, fleeing across the Mediterranean and finding himself swallowed by—and three days later spewed out by—a large fish.

The book of Jonah is funny. A man runs away from God and is swallowed by a fish—and then is spit back up on shore—which convinces him that perhaps he ought to carry out his God-given mission after all. Domestic animals are dressed in sackcloth. And when God relents, his prophet is angry, because he has been made to look like a fool.

The book is funny, but it is also a story about both the relentlessness of God's call and the breadth of God's mercy.

- Have you ever tried to evade God's call, only to find yourself back where you started?
- What do you make of the humor of the story? Can we use humor to better understand God?

Psalm 62:6-14

The overarching theme of Psalm 62 is a call to trust in God, over and above the powers and riches of this world.

But the psalm is more than a call to trust. It is also a poem. "For God alone my soul in silence waits," it begins, in the language of poetry.

The psalmist's soul can wait in silence, untroubled and without anxiety, because it is God who is awaited: awaited in perfect trust.

In the language of the psalm, God is rock and salvation, a strong rock and a refuge, a stronghold, a source of power, and the fitting recipient of steadfast love, hope, and trust.

- How might you cultivate the attitude of the psalmist, to wait for God with your soul in silence?
- What does it mean to trust in God as a strong rock and refuge, and to place your love, hope, and trust in God?

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Paul writes at great length to the church in Corinth about marriage and divorce and other social relationships. Much of his advice may seem anachronistic to us today, but underlying and informing everything he writes is the sense that time has grown short and the world is passing away. For Paul, this eschatological vision lends urgency to the call of all Christians to devote themselves to the Lord, above and beyond any earthly obligations. “Those who deal with the world” are to act “as though they had no dealings with it.”

- Given the many hundreds of years that have passed since Paul wrote to the Corinthians, can we recover the urgency of Paul’s vision of a world that is even now passing away?
- What might it mean for each of us to hold lightly the things of this world and to place our trust in God?

Mark 1:14-20

Today’s Gospel passage sounds themes of calling and of a world passing away that can also be found in the day’s other readings.

Jesus proclaims the coming of the kingdom of God and calls those who hear him to repent, to turn, at to believe in the good news.

Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, from their work as fishermen. The four men immediately follow him, leaving behind nets and family and hired workers and fishing boats still floating in the sea. This is a story of a response to God’s call that sounds very different from that of Jonah’s slow and reluctant obedience.

- What might we need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus? And can we ever hope to do so with the swiftness of Simon, Andrew, James, and John?
- What calls do we hear in our own lives? In what ways are we called to follow Jesus in our own time?

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