

EPIPHANY 3

Year B

This Bible study was written by Margaret McGhee for Epiphany 3 in 2018.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

³ The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ 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.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

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.

Discussion Questions

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

- ⁶ For God alone my soul in silence waits; *
truly, my hope is in him.
- ⁷ He alone is my rock and my salvation, *
my stronghold, so that I shall not be
shaken.
- ⁸ In God is my safety and my honor; *
God is my strong rock and my refuge.
- ⁹ Put your trust in him always, O people, *
pour out your hearts before him, for God
is our refuge.
- ¹⁰ Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath,
*
even those of low estate cannot be trusted.
- ¹¹ On the scales they are lighter than a breath, *
all of them together.
- ¹² Put no trust in extortion;
in robbery take no empty pride; *
though wealth increase, set not your heart
upon it.
- ¹³ God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, *
that power belongs to God.
- ¹⁴ Steadfast love is yours, O Lord, *
for you repay everyone according to his
deeds.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

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.

Discussion Questions

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

²⁹I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

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.”

Discussion Questions

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

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

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.

Discussion Questions

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?