Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“There is something greater than Jonah here” (Luke 11:32).

Jon 3:1-10; Lk 11:29-32

Just what is the sign of Jonah? Because the imagery is so compelling in the story, we think of Jonah going down into the belly of the whale, which then becomes a sign of Jesus going down into death and then rising up again.

But it seems fairly obvious from the context of Jesus’ response to the crowds that the sign of Jonah was simply his preaching, at which the Ninevites suddenly and dramatically repented. Jesus hears the people clamoring for some spectacular sign that will convince them to repent. They will receive no such sign, only his preaching that without repentance they were bringing down judgment on themselves.

The contrast between Jonah and Jesus could not be greater. Jonah was a reluctant prophet who first ran away from God and the mission to preach repentance in Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, one of Israel’s most hated enemies. Jonah barely whispers his message in the marketplace, and suddenly the King of Assyria orders the whole nation to put on sackcloth and ashes.

Jonah is angry that God accepts the repentance of the Ninevites and does not punish them. He has to learn the meaning of mercy from the the large plant God provides to protect him from the sun, then takes away. Everything is a gift.

It was an unlikely story, almost a joke, that such an arrogant, powerful kingdom would repent, but in the story they do. The point was that Israel was expected to do as much, and far more, because of God's many graces.

Jesus has preached his message, worked many signs and made the compelling case that repentance is the path to life. Still, the people will not hear the good news. There will be no other sign than this story of Jonah. If the call to life is not enough, what will some spectacular warning or celestial show accomplish?

On Ash Wednesday, we heard the simple message, “Repent and hear good news.” This is the sign of Jonah. Do we see it, and will we act?