Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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Some people approach the New Testament as if it were a dogmatic history recounting what was, what ought to be and offering a privileged preview to all that is to come. If they're too fundamentalist, they'll seriously think about plucking out their eye (Matthew 18:9) — or at least strive to never look at anything that might be tempting. (In old-time religious life, sisters and brothers were admonished to keep "modesty of the eyes," an avoidance of looking at "worldly" things — especially members of the opposite sex.) In our day, we interpret Scripture in its historical and cultural context, realizing that not even our Scriptures are free from images of God that reflect our frailties, saying more about us than about God.

As we hear a bit about Jonah today, we're aware that his story isn't an historical account of a fellow who spent a while in a whale, went on to a successful preaching career and finally became furious with God for not wreaking vengeance on a sinful but repentant people. Actually, we can read the Book of Jonah as the comic book of the Bible, a tale to make us laugh — until we recognize ourselves in the ridiculous conclusion of the story.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 21, 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 25
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

Today's selection from Jonah focuses only on his successful call for conversion, ending with the statement that God "repented of the evil that he had threatened." This statement needs to be understood in context. In the variety of images of God we find in Scripture, we hear about God as everything from a tender mother (Numbers 11:12) to a God of dreadful vengeance (Psalm 137: 7-9, Nahum 1:2). Our ancestors in the faith, like many of us, projected their expectations on God and

counted on God to unleash divine power to destroy the unrighteous (a term often referring to their enemies). That's quite a different image from Jesus' description of his father who cares if a sparrow falls and waits patiently for a wayward child. A vengeful image of God reflects nothing of the compassion Jesus consistently demonstrated.

We hear something quite different with Mark's portrayal of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Careful reading shows us that the only words Jesus actually preaches in the first chapters of Mark's Gospel are, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news." From Mark 1 to 4, Jesus calls disciples, heals people and converses with them; he also gets into arguments with religious authorities, warning them that they are in danger of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. But through all of that, the only actual preaching we hear are those 20 words cited above.

We might say that those 20 words referring to fulfillment, the reign of God, repentance and belief in good news are the core message of the entire Gospel. Everything else that Jesus said and did demonstrated the meaning of that message, emphasizing "repent and believe," two words which might ultimately signify the same thing. Jesus' call to repentance, metanoia, invited people to take on a new mindset.

Representing his Father, Jesus didn't focus on sin. He urged people to believe that the reigning of God, a world moving unstoppably toward unity in love, was happening in their midst. In calling them to metanoia, Jesus invited others to see what he saw — that the world was on the way to a future in which God would be all in all — and that future was already appearing.

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That message was so attractive that people began to follow him. Many continued to watch him and listen to him, gradually getting caught up in the contagious vision he offered. A chosen few accepted the invitation to throw their lot in with him and join his cause. They entered into a process of learning, of discipleship, in the course of which they found themselves transformed and giving their lives in imitation of Jesus. The more this happened, the more the announcement of the reign of God became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Jesus' announcement of the nearness of the reign of God was not one and done. The reign of God describes a web of relationships that continually grows, drawing more and more people into unity with God and neighbor — and with all of creation. Each generation is invited to develop that web in the ways most appropriate to their context, accepting the task of adapting the Gospel message so that it remains both faithful and relevant.

Today, Christ and all our ancestors in the faith invite us to adopt the mindset that expects to see that "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand."

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