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SUNDAY: Ordinary 3

SERMON: A Crisis of Good News

Text(s): Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

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Seeing the launch of a space probe to Pluto this week on TV, reminded me of something Alan Bean, one of the astronauts who participated in the Apollo 12 mission to the moon had once told a television interviewer. He said that test pilots have a rule of thumb that they use whenever they are confronted by a crisis during a flight. Before panicking, they ask themselves, "Is this thing still flying?" If the answer is yes, then they know that they have time to think before acting rather than risk a possible over-reaction. He said that during the Apollo 12 mission, just as the rocket took off from Cape Canaveral, it was struck by lightning. Immediately, many red warning lights on the control panel blinked on. But because the pilots of the craft had learned that rule of thumb, they asked, "Is this thing still flying toward the moon?" When it became obvious that they were still flying in the right direction, they decided to wait before doing anything. And in a moment or two, one by one, the red warning lights began to go off, and the flight proceeded normally the rest of the way. The moment of crisis had passed.

On the other hand, of course, there is also the old saying that if you can keep your head in a crisis while everyone else around is losing theirs, perhaps you just don't understand the situation.

A crisis, by definition, is a moment of urgency. It tends to focus our attention very closely on the present moment. Other more mundane concerns, even ones that seemed only moments ago to be important and pressing, are forgotten in the moment when all our attention, all our energy is caught up in the moment of crisis, while we decide what to do and do it. We usually think of crises as something bad or negative, often because they are provoked by some event or development that we do not desire or for which we are not prepared. The

unexpected loss of a job, or the unexpected diagnosis of a serious medical problem, or the discovery that a friend or our son or daughter is using drugs—these are the sorts of situations that feed our sense that crises themselves are bad.

But in fact, while a crisis is often provoked by some undesirable event or a conflict over some issue, the crisis itself is not necessarily bad. The Chinese word for crisis is a double character; one means danger, the other means opportunity. And that's a very helpful way to think about the crises that suddenly break in upon us. Their very suddenness, or the events that have provoked them may contain a great deal of danger. But they also bear within them the opportunity for dramatic change, for seizing the moment and allowing something new to emerge that might not have emerged had the crisis not been thrust upon us. Something like that seems to have happened in the wake of the tsunami that destroyed so much of Banda Aceh in Indonesia. The civil war that had been raging there for years appears to have ended. Confronted with the crisis that the tsunami forced upon them, it appears, from all reports at least, that the people have dramatically changed their priorities and have put their fighting behind them to unite in rebuilding their shattered city and society.

That sense of the urgency of a crisis that demands clarity and immediate decision and action pervades both of our lessons this morning. The little parable or fable of Jonah is one of the literary and theological jewels of the Hebrew scriptures. It was written by some anonymous author to counteract the highly nationalistic and ethnocentric theology of the ruling religious establishment of Judea in the sixth century before the Christian era. In the face of a politically triumphant theology that claimed that God loved only the chosen people Israel, and that Israel, therefore, had an exclusive claim on God's affections and blessings, the author spun this yarn about a prophet named Jonah who received a call one day from God to go and evangelize the city of Ninevah, the capital of the powerful overlords of Israel, the Assyrians. "Tell them that unless

they stop their bloodthirsty conquests of other peoples and their arrogant assertion of their own power and glory, they're going to be in big trouble." That's the message God gives Jonah to speak.

Now we can hardly blame Jonah for not being thrilled about this assignment. An enemy alien who showed up one day in the public market and began pronouncing divine judgment on the rulers and the citizens of that great city was not likely to receive a warm welcome. It's a suicide mission, as Jonah sees it, and so he catches a ride on a ship that is heading in the opposite direction.

But, if we remember the story from our Sunday School lessons, we know that Jonah didn't get very far. Blamed for the severe storm at sea by the superstitious sailors of the ship, Jonah is thrown overboard, only to discover that God has prepared a great fish who swallows him whole and only spits him up on dry land when he's expressed his very reluctant willingness to do what God has asked him to do..

It's unfortunate that in our Sunday School lessons, we often put all the emphasis on Jonah's personal fish story and almost no emphasis on the crisis that Jonah's message brings upon the Assyrians, or the crisis facing Israel, which was the reason for God's call to Jonah in the first place. The most important part of the story is not about Jonah's decision to go to Ninevah after all. The real crisis for Jonah and for Israel is still to come, after he proclaims, rather gleefully it must be admitted, the message of God's impending judgment on the wicked Assyrian empire.

Jonah's message to Ninevah precipitated a crisis for the rulers and citizens of that city. And to Jonah's utter chagrin, the people of Ninevah responded to that crisis by immediately and thoroughly repenting. From the king on down, the storyteller says, everybody recognized Jonah's message as God's urgent word to them, and they immediately changed their ways. As a

result, God's judgment was averted and the city was spared.

That's where our reading this morning ends, but the very next verse, if we had read on, says, "*This was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry,*" and he says to God, "I knew this would happen. It's why I didn't want to come and why I tried to run away. I knew you would be gracious and forgive these wicked enemies of ours, and now you've gone and done just that. What kind of God are you anyway?"

That's an exact description of the crisis that faces both Jonah and Israel. Is he— are they— willing to allow their own understanding of God to be enlarged enough to include the notion of God's saving love reaching out to their oppressors? Jonah's initial response is to and sit down in the dust and indulge in an angry self-pity party. He's not buying God's weak-kneed (as he sees it) sparing of Ninevah. I love Thomas John Carlyle's interpretation of Jonah's furious response, "*I hate God's enemies with a perfect hatred! Why can't God do as much?*"

We never find out in this little "whale of a tale" how Jonah or Israel responded to that crisis. The story ends with God having the last word, or rather the last question. In the face of Jonah's furious sulking at God's apparently prodigal mercy, God reproaches him, "*Jonah, why are you so angry? Should I not have compassion on Ninevah, that great city, in which there are twenty thousand people who hardly know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?*" And there the story ends; we and Jonah are simply left with that question from a God who confounds our expectations of how proper gods ought to act.

In our gospel reading, St. Mark describes the calling of Jesus' first four disciples and frames it as a crisis that confronts them. "*Jesus came preaching the gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news.'*" This

is crisis language. This is made even clearer by the translation of that sentence in Robert Miller's book *The Complete Gospels*, "*The time is up. God's imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways and put your trust in the good news.*"

If we look at the world around us, it is obvious that God's sovereign and just rule does not figure prominently in the domestic or foreign policies of many nations or politicians despite unceasing attempts to convince themselves and their constituents that they are on the side of the angels. It is not obvious that the Kingdom of God is closing in on us, is it? If it's on the way, it obviously hasn't yet arrived.

But here a line from Leslie Newbiggin that our retreat leader shared with us at the Council Retreat yesterday seems appropriate. "*If you can't see the Kingdom,*" says Newbiggin, "*it's because you're facing in the wrong direction.*" The Kingdom is standing at our front door, and has already rung the doorbell. It demands a response from us, as it demanded a response from Peter and Andrew and James and John. Will we open the door and acknowledge and accept God's rule, and authority as the supreme power in our lives and in the world? Are we prepared to change our ways of living and thinking to accommodate ourselves to this new reality that confronts us? Or will we just go about our work, turning up the volume on the television to drown out the sound of the doorbell? If we do open the door, then we enter the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God enters us. Both are true. Jesus spoke of our striving to enter the kingdom of God, but he also said, "*The Kingdom of God is among you.*" One thing is certain; if we open the door, our lives can never be the same again. The presence of God's sovereign rule of justice and love confronts us with a crisis that demands a response from us and which will, if we acknowledge it, change our lives.

The response of Peter and Andrew and James and John to Jesus' call results in a

dramatic change in the direction of their lives. "*They left their nets and their father and followed him.*" Responding to the presence of the Kingdom of God for them meant leaving their past life. By leaving their fishing nets and the nets of their family obligations to follow Christ they were not leaving something that was bad or immoral. But they had to let go of those things as the highest priority in their lives in order to give the highest priority to something else—following Jesus. We, too, sometimes allow other things—whether it's our job or our drive to succeed or our dream of a new house or the desire to make a lot of money or our political party loyalties or our patriotism—to assume a higher place in our priorities than our commitment to follow Christ as a faithful disciple. The presence of God's future, that sovereign rule of God which is closing in, demands that we give God first place in our allegiance and in our lives. Jesus said it this way, "*Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's justice, and all these other things will be yours as well.*" In other words, keep your priorities straight. And keeping them straight means giving highest priority to the will of God in our lives.

All this talk of changing our ways, of letting go of other things in light of the presence of God's future, and of re-ordering our priorities may sound about as appealing as going to the dentist for a root canal. But the crisis in which we hear the call of Christ to follow him is not simply a demand; it is an invitation to a new life of freedom. It's not simply "*Change your ways,*" but "*Change your ways and put your trust in the good news.*" For the gospel is good news, not bad news. God's imperial rule of justice and love is good news for a world in which the powers that be are mostly oppressive, and where injustice, lack of compassion, and the degrading of our sacred humanity are seemingly omnipotent. The call to join Christ's company of those who embody God's rule rather than the rule of the earthly powers is not something that takes

away our freedom, but rather it gives us the only true freedom we shall ever know. To re-order our priorities and our relationships so that we can truly engage our society with the vision of God's justice and to try to embody that justice in our lives and our relationships is good news. But it demands a decision from us.

Responding to the presence of the Kingdom is both an individual call, as it was for Peter and Andrew and James and John and Jonah, and it is also a call to become part of a fellowship, of a community whose corporate life embodies the reality of God's kingdom of justice and love. That's what the Church is called to be—the outpost, the living embodiment right now of the future reign of God. We are called individually to be together. And it is in company with one another that we have to work out what our corporate and our individual discipleship will look like.

Yesterday, our Church Council and some others who are past or potential leaders in our fellowship wrestled with just these sorts of issues in an all day retreat led by an outside consultant. We struggled with questions like “What is our real identity as a congregation?” “What is our shared vision of ministry?” How do we live in, and get comfortable with, some of the unresolved and unresolvable tensions that characterize the life of any organization and any church—tensions between private faith and public action, tensions between how much we focus on our internal life and how much we focus on our mission to the world around us, tensions between how much we spend on maintaining our facilities and how much we spend on creating new ministries, tensions between following established traditions and being open to innovation and change. It was an energizing day for all of us who were there, and those discussions will certainly shape the conversations that go on at all levels of our church life over the coming months and years.

As Anita, our retreat leader closed by

asking each of us to use one word or phrase about how we were feeling about First Parish Church at that moment, the words that occurred most frequently were “grateful,” “hopeful,” “optimistic,” and “energized.”

Every Christian and every church is confronted by the crisis that the presence of God's kingdom brings upon us. Will we have the courage and faith to brave the dangers and risks that crisis carries with it in order to realize the abundant new life and exciting opportunities it promises? The future of First Parish Church and our own individual well-being will hang on our response to that divine call to “*change our ways and put our trust in the good news.*”