**Text**: Book of Jonah and Mark 1:14-20

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

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 January 21, 2018 – 3rd Sunday of Epiphany On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
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Raise your hand if you have read one entire book in the Bible. Which one?

I invite you to turn to page 752 in your pew Bible. I want to spend our sermon time today on THIS book in the Bible: the story of Jonah. I think that not EVERYONE realizes that JONAH is not only a person in the Bible who spent 3 days in the belly of a big fish, but that JONAH is also an entire book in the Hebrew Scriptures. Maybe not everyone realizes that God gave Jonah a very big job to do. Maybe not everyone realizes the amazing number of life and faith lessons that are IN this amazing story.

In our lessons for today, this story of Jonah is paired with Mark’s account of Jesus, calling the first disciples. Why would the Jonah-story be linked up with Jesus calling Simon and Andrew and Peter to “follow me?”

Maybe we need more information, first, about this Jonah-guy. So let’s look at the story.

Once upon a time there was a GREAT city, named Nineveh…known to be a very WICKED city.

Nineveh’s wicked ways made God very sad. So God told JONAH to go to Nineveh and warn the people that God was noticing their wicked ways…Jonah decided to trick God, so he got on a boat that would take him to Tarshish, not Nineveh: instead of going to the northeast, he headed southwest.

Why didn’t Jonah want to go to Nineveh? We’ll find out in a few minutes.

So now, on the ship with a crew of a pagan captain and sailors, Jonah decides to take a nap. WHEW ! made my get-away ! Not so fast, Jonah: a huge storm starts brewing and the sailors are scared spitless. The captain yells at Jonah: how can you sleep at a time like this? Pray to your god so that this storm will stop.

The sailors said: let’s roll the dice and see who’s to blame for this horrific storm: sure enough, the dice indicated that Jonah was to blame. Jonah did not deny his guilt: throw me overboard and your storm will stop. And that is what happened: they threw Jonah over and the sea became totally calm.

And Jonah? Well, God made sure that he did not die: he provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah…and Jonah stayed in the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Then God told the fish to spit (or vomit) Jonah onto the dry land. And God said: NOW, Jonah…NOW get yourself to Nineveh and give them my message…so Jonah went: delivered a very short sermon: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

PRESTO ! The people of Nineveh actually believed Jonah, said they were sorry, declared a fast…and EVERYONE repented…even the king…and he commanded that EVERYONE should be covered with sackcloth and ashes and STOP DOING all those evil things. The king’s orders also included all the animals! The king said:

WHO KNOWS ? ! ? ! God might change God’s mind

And NOT punish us. And that is exactly what happened…Chapter 3, v. 10 and 11: God changed God’s mind!

End of story, right? Jonah was SO HAPPY that the people stopped being wicked. Jonah was so HAPPY that God did not destroy the city…and everyone lived happily ever after. RIGHT ??? Wrong…

Jonah was ‘very displeased’ and he became very angry. He yelled at God, saying: O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country ?! THIS is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place: For I knew you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love…and you, Great God of all, YOU are capable of changing your mind and deciding NOT to punish the people who really, really deserve to die !

Since this is the kind of God you are, now please: just let me die…I do not want to live with THIS kind of a God.

Jonah went outside of the city and sat and moped. God noticed that the sun was really hot on Jonah, as he sat there, so God made a little bush grow right there to give Jonah some shade…Jonah really LIKED that bush…but the next day, a worm started eating the bush and it died…so now the sun was so hot that Jonah couldn’t bear the heat…so he asked God, once again, to let him die…

God asked Jonah: Is it right for you to be angry about the bush dying? Jonah said it was right for him to be angry enough to die.

Jonah was a puzzle to God: really, Jonah? You are sad to see one little bush die, but you don’t think that I should be sad to see more than 120,000 people…and all their animals…die…you are angry because I care about all people and animals?

Who is God in the Jonah story?

* A God who notices what humans do and expects humans to live together well.
* A God who takes care of ALL people, the pagan captain and sailors, as well as his Israelite children.
* A God who takes time to talk with and listen to us, when God’s ways don’t make sense to us.
* A God who is flexible and gracious enough to change God’s mind sometimes.
* A God who does surprising things, outside of our expectations.
* A God who wants us to care about all creation in the same ways that God does.