

EPIPHANY 3
21.1.2024
CAVES BEACH UNITING CHURCH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Spirit of God, moving over the waters, bringing light where there was only darkness;

Holy Spirit, move among us, change us, enlighten us.

Spirit of God, there at the baptism of Jesus, claiming, anointing, speaking loving words;

Holy Spirit, touch us, enthuse us, claim us.

Spirit of God, calling disciples in days of old and today to follow Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life;

Holy Spirit, meet us, convince us, inspire us.

OPENING PRAYER

Trust in God!

God will give us the challenging task, but also the strength to get it done.

Trust in God!

God will call us to discipleship, and give us the insight to work out our following of Jesus.

Trust in God!

God will show us our role within the faith community, and sensitivity to the needs of those

beside us.

Trust in God!

God will love us “through all the changing scenes of life,” and will be there at life’s end, to welcome us home. Amen

HYMN TiS 454 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

https://youtu.be/ytBTMr0K__I

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of joy,

we give you thanks that you gift us this extraordinary journey of life.

With amazement, we see the places your call takes us.

We are grateful to be part of your people and to follow you in the journey.

We are thankful for the fellow travellers who have gifted us wisdom, shared laughter and tears.

We are thankful that ordinary moments are made extraordinary by your presence and by the company of others.

For the gift of Christian community,

for the challenge of Christian discipleship,

and for the joy of journeying with you, we offer our thanks.

God who calls us,

we come to our time of confession, knowing just how often we fall short.

We come knowing that so often our eyes are fixed upon things that do not bring life and love.

Turn us towards your paths, God of compassion.

Jonah came to the Ninevites, revealing to them their evil ways.
They turned to you and changed their ways.
We come knowing that we don't want to hear the words of prophets that call us to new ways as
a society and community.
Turn us towards your paths, God of compassion.

Jesus came to Simon and Andrew, James and John,
and called them to leave the security of their daily living.
We come knowing our resistance to hearing your call
when it is challenging, risky, or demands us to change.
Turn us towards your paths, God of compassion.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Hear the good news:

God is steadfast in the ways of love and persistent in calling us to follow.
God's call, even when it is challenging, is also filled with joy and surprises.
God's compassion is greater than we can comprehend.
God is patient and just, loving and forgiving.
We acknowledge God's goodness, are grateful and so we say together:

Thanks be to God. Amen

READINGS

* Jonah 3: 1-5,10

¹ 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.

* 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;^[c] 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 lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for 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.

HYMN TIS 598 Dear Father, Lord of Humankind

<https://youtu.be/1Uj060nzx7Q>

SERMON

Most of the time the two passages that we hear read of a Sunday are linked in such a way that they support each other and help us to have deeper understanding of God's word. For instance the link between today's passages - one from the Old Testament and one from the New - would be that they are both about repentance - Jonah's call to the Ninevites for their repentance, and Jesus' call was both for repentance and proclamation of the coming of God's Kingdom. But that similarity is about as far as it goes. And it is helpful to keep in mind that theologians class the book of Jonah as fictional humour (although serious in its own way), whereas Mark's gospel is factual narrative - although some details may be questioned given that it was written down well after the events occurred.

Talking about serious humour, I recall a friend of mine, The Rev'd Dr Bert Brown, a pioneer missionary who worked in the Gulf of Papua, telling me of a very serious situation he found himself in - and it was humour that saved him and the men with him. With some coastal Papuans he was walking from the lowlands of the Gulf to the mountains up in the Highlands. Climbing upwards from the lowlands, he and his men looked up and saw a group of highlanders above them armed with spears and ready to fight, which no doubt was going to happen before, or when, they reached the top of the ridge. Bert and his followers never carried arms. He was a man of prayer and could think outside of the box. He messaged his men telling them they were to begin to laugh - laugh loud enough for the men above to hear them. There was no common language - the coastal would have been Toaripi, and the highlands language in that area I think was Kunimaipa. But Bert knew that there is common communication among all people - we all cry and we all laugh! And laughter is as good a sound as any to indicate you are friendly. By the time they got to the top, instead of being speared they were able to meet and I guess shake hands, or whatever those people did to show friendship.

I've gone off track in telling you that story but it is a great story. All the time now on the TV we hear of fighting and war in so many places across the globe, and here was one man of God who knew a different way. And by the way, he was to translate the scriptures in both those languages - the whole Bible in Toaripi, and the New Testament in Kunimaipa - with his dear wife Annie, trying to decipher his writing in pencil and get it presentable using her old typewriter.

Now this morning we'll have a look at what we can learn from Jonah, along with the call of some of the disciples that we read about in Mark's gospel. And see what we can take from our understanding of the scriptures for our lives as we journey on into the week ahead - indeed, into the year ahead.

I think one thing to realise is that these passages remind us that it is not so much about what we ourselves do, but what God does. How God's love is perceived and shared and accepted. Again, one thing I learnt loud and clear in my missionary work was that the former old missionaries were not remembered because of what they got done in terms of work, but rather by how much love they showed to the people - that was what mattered most. That helped me because very early I was able to prioritise my way of being, of operating. Loving and caring ways in line with God's will had to be at the top of the list. Whether a job got done or not, or when it got done, came second. Patience, acceptance, understanding the people and their ways, so different often to mine, was paramount.

But Jonah? Well, he could not even accept that God had any love for the people. He could not accept the generosity of God in his grace - and particularly to people who were different to him. For that matter, he didn't even want to be a prophet. The passage we have heard this

morning was just a few verses from chapter three, but it is what happened in chapter one that sets the scene. I'm pretty sure you'll all know the story: how Jonah did all he could to avoid God's call. Instead of heading north-east to Nineveh where God told him to go, he sailed west, and when God sends the storm upon the ship, he is actually willing to be cast overboard and drown rather than heed God's call. And then we have the odd and funny story of God sending a great fish to swallow him, and later regurgitate him - which brings us up to the verses Wendy just read to us. At last we find that he is in the right place, that great city of Nineveh from which he can now go about his God-given task. When you look at it as a whole, the story of Jonah is like a satire of a kind of discipleship that is a closed shop - Jonah absolutely refuses to understand the nature and breadth of God's gracious desire to forgive.

So I think you can already grasp the contrast between Jonah's approach to discipleship, compared to what the gospel portrays. Last week you might remember that we thought about the call of Philip and particularly Nathanael that John records in chapter one of his gospel. Today from Mark's gospel we have the call of Simon (who our Lord was later to call Peter), and his brother Andrew, as well as the sons of Zebedee who are James and John. Here we find another difference to the story of Jonah. Instead of a story of just one man and his reluctance to answer God's call, in the Gospel narrative we have a group forming - so we realise then that following Jesus is not just about individuals, it's not a solo trip, but it's about forming community. This is Mark's emphasis throughout his gospel and we even find that he exploits the disciples' ways to the limit: he does it by using their human frailty to expose the value systems which conflict with those of Jesus. Remember for instance, when they had that argument about who was the greatest among them? And another time when they said they wanted to sit with Jesus, one at his right hand and one at his left, in glory? They wanted to be at the top of the pecking order, which was exactly opposite to our Lord's teaching, and yet even so, Mark makes it clear that the Good News includes those very disciples with all their foibles.

Today we call the Christian community the church. The church performs about as well as those disciples in Mark. We get off track, we miss opportunities, some want to be at the top to have special privileges, we are truly a motley bunch. But nevertheless, just like the disciples, we are needed. We belong! Jesus was not a loner, not someone who did things solo, like Jonah - rather, Jesus calls us to be with him. And by the way, that was my friend Bert's way too - he continually trained up Papuan pastors to go out on treks with him.

Hear our Lord's call: "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of people" (Mark1:17). What does Jesus mean there? If we look at the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, we find he uses the analogy of fishing, of catching people, in order to bring them to judgement. Amos, another prophet, talks of people being caught and carried off and flung away with fish-hooks! So is this fishing business really a helpful analogy? Yet this is the verse from Mark that is so often used for Christian mission - catch as many people as you can to join us. But did Jesus and the disciples go out looking for numbers? Is that what is meant here? So that brings us to the question: were they success centred, or were they caring centred?

For the answer, we look to how Mark portrays Jesus' ministry. We see our Lord reaching out and touching people, he brings healing to individuals, he brings liberation and renewal. That was high focus. And very importantly, as we've noted, the Good News of the Kingdom included, involved, the disciples - it meant them joining Jesus in action. It is about belonging to a movement bringing about change. In particular it meant bringing about a change in understanding about God - a return to the God of compassion and justice.

I think we need to remember too, that in fact Jesus only asked for a small number of people to join him on his meanderings. These disciples had a particular role and they were being given a particular formation. They were not better than the rest, but simply given a special calling.

Actually by far the majority who believed in Jesus' message would have stayed at home, sharing Jesus' teachings there around their neighbourhood. Think of Zebedee - someone was still needed to mend the nets, others still needed to fish. I'm reminded of the TV show about the Scottish vet that's on at present - war breaks out, but vets in the countryside were needed too, not only soldiers! The point is that whether we are called into some particular order of ministry, like clergy, or being a missionary, or whether we belong to the order of ministry that stays home and ministers in our local community, the challenge to all of us is to be part of the kingdom. "Bloom where you are planted," was the catch cry of the church youth groups around the Papuan Islands! Probably still is. So true: "Bloom where you are planted!"

I think I have rambled a bit this morning. And maybe that's not been so helpful. I was talking to a clergyman now in his nineties during the week, and he pointed out to me that a sermon should have three points, you develop those and that's what people will remember. So, I wonder, can I make just three points for what I've shared with you so far?

One: God did get his message of repentance over to the people of Nineveh, even though Jonah, God's very reluctant prophet, did his best to sabotage it!

Two: Jesus message is also about repentance and God's compassion, but his is not a solo act - he calls disciples to be on this journey with him to bring in the Kingdom of God which is not about numbers, but about love in action.

Three: Like the disciples then, so the church today is the same: to bring in the Kingdom of God - whether followers of Jesus are in a special ministry, or ministry "at home" - blooming where they are planted. For all of us ministry is about God's love in action.

This gleaning from scripture I'm going to suggest is particularly important at this time for us as a faith community, because during this week, on Friday the 26th, the date closes for the applications to come in for the position of our Part-time Community Engagement Co-ordinator for our congregation. Of course I do realise that it is also the date that marks Australia Day, and I'm aware too, that this date has conflicting issues for our nation regarding the plight of indigenous people. Repentance, compassion (there's those words again) - a deep listening to what God is saying to us as a nation will be encouraged by Christian leaders. Our Uniting Church president, Rev Sharon Hollis, has written to encourage us to discover ways to create communities of justice and healing. Very apt words considering our scriptures this morning.

And apt too, as the new appointment for this congregation is now imminent. Apt because all of us are Jesus disciples, and are needed in this new venture. We all have our ministries, our gifts and talents from God to share alongside the person selected for this role who will help us strengthen our engagement to our community. We will cover the venture in prayer, clothe ourselves with God's love, and the motley lot that we are, we will follow in our Lord's footsteps, and if the going gets tough we can be sure that He will pick us up and carry us on towards His kingdom.

And on that note, may I lead you in a prayer to finish? Let us pray:

Loving God, we thank you that all of us are called into relationship with you and with each other. Thank you for the opportunities ahead of us. We pray for your discernment and wisdom upon those involved in the selection process for our new appointment, and that together we will joyfully be Jesus' disciples until our life's end. In Jesus' wonderful name we pray, Amen.

HYMN TiS 465 Father in Heaven

<https://youtu.be/1Uj060nzx7Q>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

God our Creator, each day comes with many gifts from you. We give thanks for the gifts we have received and know that we also have much to share. Loving God, call us onward into your gift-giving, life-bringing way of being in the world. We dedicate these gifts and ourselves for your service. Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

In the beginning.

Firstly... Thank you for your prayers for the healing of Jeff's foot.

Today, I want to use quotations from "Unlocking the Bible " by CS Smith, where he deals with the early chapters of Genesis in a remarkable way.

There is no debate about when Genesis was written

There is no debate about whether Adam and Eve were real people.

There is no Debate about evolution...

Instead, a correlation between the situation that Adam and Eve found themselves inin their relations to Godand comparing similar experiences with us & Christ with his temptations, relationship with God, and the wonderful consequences of his death and resurrection

1. God made male and female to reflect something of his own nature and glory from the dust of the ground, and breathed the breath of life into man's nostrils... God gives life and breath to everyone

2. God made himself visible by walking with Adam and Eve as surely, as Peter, James and John walked with the son of God in Galilee ... So God creates a relationship with each one of us... We cannot see God, but Jesus Christ gives us access to the father when we come in faith in prayer,

3. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden, somewhere in the Middle East... God has placed you where you are.God has a plan and a purpose for us.

4. Imagine life in Eden ... Adam's work is fulfilling... He enjoys the companionship of Eve and the company of God He reaches up and picks his food from the trees... His whole life is one of blessing and joy.

5. However by the end of Genesis, chapter 3 everything has changed... The man and woman find themselves struggling to make a life in a very different world out in the wilderness ...they experience pain ,fear and guiltthey no longer see God

6. Right from the beginning of human history Satan was an enemy bent on destroying the work of God. Satan successfully recruited Adam and Eve into his rebel cause ...introducing a virus known as sin into the entire human race,

7. Sin is the source of our sickness... God has a cure... provided for us in Jesus Christ .

8. Satan said, –“ why is God telling you what to do – you can decide what's good and evil for yourself.”– We humans want to be God.

9. The first couple disobeyed God's first command, and got what they wanted – the knowledge of evil . Yet God has not abandoned us. ...He sent his son into the fallen world, and into our ongoing battle with evil... He was tempted in a similar way, but with a different outcome – Jesus triumphed whereas Adam and we fail

10. God cursed the serpent (set him apart for destruction)Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law when he hung on the cross.

11. Through Christ's death, Jesus released a wound on the enemy (called Satan) He cleared a new and living way into the presence of God – he opened the way to all who will come to God through Jesus Christ – the grace and mercy of God

Let us pray.

Our God and heavenly fatherwe thank you for your word the Bible as it uncovers all our weaknesses and invites us for cleansing through the blood of Christ

We thank you that despite us being under the spell of Satan, we are set free completely from the virus of sin through our Lord and Saviour -Jesus Christ

We realise that we humans have certainly fallen out of daily fellowship with you in our quest for freedom, knowledge and selfish power.

As we look at our beautiful world, full of your amazing creativity, we observe the atmosphere, the water cycle, living things, the balance of nature and rock formations..... we pray for forgiveness for our greed, resulting in pollution and extinction... Our selfishness resulting in riots and wars...

Our lack of time spent communing with you resulting in crime and depravity. Lord, forgive us, and give us strength to rise up and stand firm in our faith

We pray for our country Australia... We have so many freedoms... We pray for our prime minister and federal parliament(our leaders)... We pray for your divine guidance for them as they deal with multiple problems at home and overseas.

We think of those people suffering damage due to fires, floods, riots, and war both here & around the world. We pray for those who are involved in giving assistance and aid to these people,

There is so much distress, misery, fear, and anxiety...(so far from your mercy, grace and peace) because of Satan and sin.

We pray for our small church here at Caves Beach... Lord, we want to serve you... We want to be your representatives in our community... Show us the way oh Lord.

We have members who are in care – or have moved closer to relatives, – some members are undergoing or have already had procedures, operations and diagnosis of illnessesLord please be with them.

We pray for those present at our church gathering this morning... For every person involved in any way in its presentation Lord bless them. Allow us to leave this place filled with your holy spirit and the love and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ

We will now say the Lord's prayer together.

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN TiS 626 Lord of creation, to you be all praise!

<https://youtu.be/436QFVuUi9o>

BENEDICTION

Go out into the world this week taking the Good News of God's love in Jesus.

Believe it, become a part of it, and carry it with you.

May the love of God guide you,

May the invitation of Jesus be your joy,

And may the freedom of the Holy Spirit put a spring in your step.

May we go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen