

“Leave the Stuff Behind”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 24, 2021 – Third Sunday after Epiphany
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

“Don’t just sit there. Do something!” The Rev. Dr. Robert Schuller of California’s Crystal Cathedral called us to action using these words decades ago as part of an advertisement for his church’s Hour of Power TV program. Do you remember seeing this commercial? I don’t recall ever actually watching the Crystal Cathedral’s Hour of Power, but I vividly recall Pastor Schuller encouraging me and the rest of the television-watching public to do so. Or at least we were all encouraged by him to do *something*.

In today’s scripture lessons we read of others who lived long before Dr. Schuller and likewise called their audiences to action: to not just sit there, but to do something!

In our reading from the Hebrew scriptures, it was God who called the prophet Jonah to do something: to go up to Nineveh and proclaim to the people of that city God’s message. This, as we know, was not the first time God called Jonah to action, but it was the first time that the prophet obeyed this call from God. He had earlier received the assignment to go to Nineveh, but he moved instead in the opposite direction and tried to get as far away from Nineveh as possible, going west when God called him to go east. While it was silly of Jonah to think he could sail so far away that he could actually escape from the one who created and commands the seas or the call of the creator upon him, it’s understandable that he did not want to actually go to the city of Nineveh to proclaim God’s message to them.

This great city was the capital of the empire of Assyria, which was not in any way friendly to the Kingdom of Israel, where the prophet Jonah lived. In fact, Assyria was a feared and hated enemy of Israel. It was an eminently powerful empire, that was built, as empires are, by violent acts conquest of less powerful people. And the violence and wickedness of its capital city, Nineveh, was known by all in Israel. So Jonah's disobedient action—going west when he was called to go east—is understandable. Who would want to go to *those* wicked people? And to proclaim God's message to *them*? No thank you!

But though Jonah did his best to run away from the job, God would not leave him alone. After sailing away, being tossed into the angry sea, getting gobbled up by a very big fish, and then spit out on shore, God called him once more to go up to the city of Nineveh. This time he did.

Jonah's message to the Ninevites was this: In 40 days, you *will* be destroyed! This was not like the other messages of the prophets of Israel and Judah, in which there were not just a messages of impending destruction, but either calls to avoid destruction by turning from wickedness and obeying God, or messages of restoration for those who had already been ruined because of wickedness or disobedience. The prophets always gave messages that provided hope. This was not so in the case of Jonah's proclamation to Nineveh. There would only be destruction, and there were no ifs, ands, or buts. For them, there was no hope.

And yet the people of Nineveh, from the king to the slave, didn't just sit there. They did something! They recognized their own wickedness, and in a symbolic act, draped themselves (even their cattle) in sackcloth. They turned from their evil ways, and because of their humble repentance, God also did something: God repented, and decided not to smite them after all.

The story goes on to tell us that Jonah was not at all happy with God's mercy. Or Jonah was not happy with God's mercy towards evil Ninevites, enemy others, whom he thought deserved to be smitten, and not smitten as in struck-with-love, but smitten as in struck-by-God's-terrible-and swift-sword. Jonah was plenty happy when God saved his own life with a fish, but Jonah thought that God's mercy should not be extended to these Assyrians. But God's message to Jonah, and through Jonah to us, is this: When people repent of their waywardness and wickedness, God doesn't just sit there; God does something: God extends mercy, and does so to prophets of Israel and their enemies alike.

In our reading from the gospel of Mark, we read of others who took action when called to do so. Jesus calls out to some fishermen to leave their nets behind and take up the occupation of following him instead. And they do! These harvesters of the sea obeyed the call of Jesus, immediately turning from all they knew and all that brought them comfort, leaving behind their livelihoods and even their loved ones to follow him. The gospel of Mark goes on to portray these disciples as always being kind of clueless about who they were actually following or what it meant to be his disciple, but they remained faithful in obeying the call to action, and that is what really mattered.

God still calls people to action, and responding to that call is still what really matters. God still calls people, like Jonah, to go where they are uncomfortable being and to be with those with whom they differ so that God's realm of mercy can expand. God still calls people, like the disciples, to leave everything behind and to take on new ways of living, even if that means giving up that which has a lifetime of comfort. And so when God calls, leave the stuff behind, go where God calls you go, and do what God calls you to do, no matter how uncomfortable, risky, or unsavory it may seem.

I'm reminded of the story of the balloon man, which is a story told by Minister Les Christie about a man who spent his life carrying very colorful balloons. This man, over the course of his lifetime, collected balloons and enjoyed watching them float over his head. He carried them everywhere that he went and enjoyed brightening up the spaces where he went with his balloons, such as the local fair, where he would go and have a great time and bring joy to all the people there who saw his many wonderful balloons. Sometimes people would try to buy his balloons thinking he was a vendor, but he would never sell them or give them away, because to him they were precious and brought him great joy.

Well, one day a message came in the mail telling the balloon man that he had won a cruise (this was back in the days when people still went on cruises). When he got on the boat, he received an invitation to dine with the captain. What a great honor this was! He was looking forward to that moment all day long, and sat out upon the deck with his balloons overhead waving in the breeze as the ship sailed along. All the while, he looked forward to dinner, when he would meet with the captain and enjoy fellowship with this commander of the ship.

And when the time came, he tried to get inside to the dining hall to sit at the captain's table, but there was just one problem: The balloon man, because he was carrying his many bright, colorful balloons, couldn't get in. He had too many balloons to fit in the passageway that would allow him to sit at the captain's table. As much as he tried squeezing through the portal that would let him into the dining hall, he just couldn't fit because of all of his balloons.

Well, this grieved him greatly, but he decided he would return to the deck where he would be alone and would miss the company of the captain, but where he would still have his balloons. Eventually, he

decided he might let the balloons go so that he could go inside to dine with the captain. And so he did; with great difficulty, he opened up his hand and he let them go, slowly, one by one and then watched them drift away into the sky. But then he was able to go inside and sit at the captain's table! And it was there that he enjoyed the greatest feast and the finest company he had ever known.

This story of the balloon man reminds us that sometimes the things we carry in life -- even the good things and the beautiful things -- can get in our way of enjoying the best things.

Letting go of the stuff that keeps us from moving in the direction God calls us to move in is not always easy. This can be terribly difficult, and this can even be painful. And sometimes we have to give up even the good stuff to find the better stuff. But is always most blessed to leave the stuff behind, any of the stuff, all of the stuff, if it keeps us from moving when we are called to move. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, "let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

So what's clinging to you and keeping you from moving forward on the path set before you by God? Desire to be comfortable? Fear of loss? Fear of failure? Whatever it is, let it go, leave the stuff behind. As you do so, may you find blessing, may the world be blessed, and may God be blessed. Amen.