

“Stylin’ in Sackcloth”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 21, 2024 - Third Sunday after Epiphany

[Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20](#)

Good morning to you all on this bone-chillingly cold day in the middle of the winter season, which some of us know as the season after the Epiphany. Some of us also know this season as a post-season, as in time for the NFL Playoffs, and some of us may call it the Awards season, as in time for exceptional work from the last year for those in the film, TV, and music industries to be lauded in fancy award ceremonies.

This year’s Awards season is already in full swing with the Golden Globes and the Primetime Emmys having been handed out over the last couple of weeks and the Grammys and Academy Awards coming up soon. Being awarded at all of these Awards season events for rooms full of well-dressed A-list celebrities (along with even more B-, C-, D-, and F-list celebrities) are not only glistening trophies, handed out for professional excellence or achievement, but praise and/or scorn given for attendees’ fashion choices. Some of us are more interested in seeing the parade of glamorously-dressed celebrities as they strut down the red carpets on their way into the ceremonies than we are seeing who actually wins various awards in the shows. Perhaps you are one of these fashion-focused folks, and if you are, you probably noticed that none of the outfits worn by the stars, at least at this point in Awards season, has been made from some lauded designer out of sackcloth!

My guess is that it’s unlikely that you will in the shows to come either as sackcloth is not high on anyone’s list of fabrics to wear when dressing to impress, or at any other time, really. This coarse and abrasive goat-hair fabric, which is named 48 times in the Bible, was worn in Ancient Israel, usually along with ashes, as a sign of humility, often by those who were grieving some great loss or who were seeking mercy from some ruler or from God. And so garments of humility-signifying, uncomfortable sackcloth would be very out of place at shows celebrating people’s successes or greatness.

Garment of sackcloth were the perfect attire, however, for seasons of repentance, as we heard in our scripture lesson from Jonah. We heard how the prophet Jonah went to Nineveh, which was the capital city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the largest city in the world at the time, and proclaimed to them that they, and their rule over the whole region, would be overturned in 40 days. And the people of Nineveh, from the least to the greatest, from the lowliest commoner to the loftiest celebrity, believed Jonah's message and responded by putting on sackcloth, fasting, and turning from their evil ways. The book of Jonah tells us that even the mighty king and the lowly cattle wore sackcloth as a sign of their humility and willingness to repent or change.

Perhaps Jonah was wearing sackcloth himself when he came into the great city of Nineveh, proclaiming his message of doom and gloom, as he was also experiencing a season of repentance. You may remember his story, which begins with God calling this prophet to go up from where he was in the land of Judah and to go east to Nineveh to preach his message, and that instead of obeying God, Jonah went down to the Mediterranean port of Joppa, got on a boat, and then headed in the exact opposite direction. While running away from his job, and trying to do the impossible in running away from God, he found himself being thrown overboard by the boat's gentile sailors when they encountered a deadly storm and learned that it was probably Jonah's fault for running away from the God of Israel. Sure enough, as Jonah went down in the sea, the storm stopped, the waters grew calm, and the foreign sailors worshipped Israel's God.

But Jonah's journey didn't end at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, for God made a big fish to come and swallow Jonah and to carry him back to the shore, where, he again was told by God to go to Nineveh. Having been turned away from his wayward and downward direction by God, and having been shown mercy and grace by a fish-haven-providing, still-calling God, Jonah himself repented, turning from his disobedient ways as he turned towards the imperial capital.

Repentant Jonah was perhaps wearing sackcloth, or hopefully some other change of clothes after being in the gut of a fish for three days and three nights, when he came to the great, foreign city to proclaim its destruction. Surely, obedient Jonah wished for its destruction, as the Assyrians had laid waste to the northern

kingdom of Israel and threatened his own southern kingdom of Judah with the same treatment unless they continued their heavy tribute payments. Much to Jonah's dismay, his enemies, the gentile people of Nineveh, inexplicably believed the message of this insignificant, stinky, subjugated preacher. They donned their sackcloth and repented, turning from their evil ways. God, who was merciful and gracious to a wayward prophet, was merciful and gracious to Jonah's enemies as well and repented from a plan to destroy them.

The wonderful little book of Jonah was likely written sometime after Nineveh had indeed been destroyed, along with Jerusalem, by the Babylonians, and the wayward, disobedient children of Israel were taken away by them to live as exiles in Babylon. There, in the belly of the beast, they were preserved by God, just as God kept Jonah alive in the belly of the fish, and they were taught by the story of Jonah that God seeks for them to repent, just as God seeks for all people, Jews and gentiles alike, to turn from their disobedient and destructive ways and towards God and God's life-giving, merciful, gracious ways for all people, that in changing, wearing sackcloth or not, they might find their own lives renewed and give praise to God.

As we heard in today's gospel lesson, the message for all people to repent and experience the good news of life made new was one that Jesus also offered. He was himself made new when he left his craftsman's tools behind in Nazareth to become a traveling prophet, teacher, and healer, and his first acts after being baptized into this new identity was to call others to repent, to turn from their own ways of living, even if those ways were good, and to embrace something better. He called fishermen to repent of their lives as harvesters of fish to be gatherers of people, to call others to turn from their own paths, especially those that are destructive, and to turn instead to path that leads to new life by living faithfully, freely receiving and sharing God's life-changing love.

Those Jewish fishermen responded to the call to change course just like the gentile Ninevites and God's prophet Jonah. The call of God for us all to change still goes out. Will we, like the first disciples, heed the call? Will we follow wherever Christ leads? Will we go, even to our enemies or those we dislike or disagree with or consider to be deserving of their own destruction, to show them

God's mercy and grace? Will we turn each day toward God and receive these gifts, freely given to each of us?

Today; throughout this winter, Awards, and playoff season; and always, may we turn more towards God and life that God desires for us to enjoy. Repentance is required; sackcloth is optional.