

"Get Up and Go"

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark 1:14-20

January 22, 2012

It is great to be back among you - as so many will acknowledge, it is great to get away for a time but it is really wonderful to be home {although I am not so sure about the -22 degree temperatures that welcomed us back- made us feel almost unwelcome}. It is something of a harsh reality and we commented several times about the difference in being in 20 below weather and living with 80 above and thought that many people just don't know what it is like. There was one man, around my age, that we talked to that said that he had never seen a snow flake. Nope - much of the world just doesn't know what it means to be a North Dakotan. Another man that we talked to was really excited to hear that we were from ND and went on to say that he and his wife had been to N.D. Last summer - all of his life he had wanted to see real cowboys ... So they finally came to N.D. To see cowboys first hand. Nope - a lot of folks just don't know what it means to be a North Dakotan. I wish they knew the beauty of snow flakes and life of regular mid-west cow-folk and even the harsh reality of 30 below. But I suppose that there are more important things that I wish the world could see. Hold that thought for a moment.

These things are related to our scriptures today and what I think God's word wants to get across to us. The scriptures come with the harsh reality of a 30 below North Dakota day. And it is my hope that we can step into out into this word of God and really experience it so that we can really know what this Word say to us.

Did you hear the harsh reality of these words? The Apostle Paul talks about how short the times is before the present form of the world passes out of existence - that is harsh. Jonah steps into Nineveh and tells them that they have 40 days to repent or they will be destroyed. That's harsh. And then there is the Gospel text ... Holding up as an example for us those disciples that just got out of their boats and left everything in order to follow Jesus. We marvel. But it is so unrealistic - it is a harsh expectation that we might hear and then say that God doesn't really expect us to do such a thing - we are not going to do that - we are not going to turn and leave what is comfortable behind to follow Christ - God can't expect that of us Can He?

Oh, it is great to be home Safe in the church Safe among the people of God. This is the world we know - the life we know. We don't really need to experience anything new. Sometimes we don't really want to hear the word that we hear any more than we want to step out in the frigid N.D. Temps. Oh, it is good to be home. But sometimes we are too comfortable and we need to hear the call to turn and follow Jesus into a new place.

Before you start to drift off into other important thoughts because the sermon has gotten to be too long, let me just pose a little question and then give you a little Biblical history lesson. [Yes, I know you are excited.]

First, the question - a question that has to come out of reading the Gospel text. What would ever make a person drop everything and follow Christ? The disciples were well settle in their lives, they were comfortable when Jesus came to them and said 'follow me.' To drop what you are familiar with and leave home - it is almost inconceivable. To turn from what you know - what is comfortable - what seems right and good That is tough. Even if one comes to understand that the present for of the world is fleeting and everything is going to change one day, it is really hard to put aside what we know and what is part of our lives ... To put it all aside and follow Christ. No matter what the situation, it is tough. But ask yourself the question, what would make you drop your nets - drop everything that is familiar and comfortable in order to follow Christ?

Now the history lesson because I believe we simple can not understand the story of Jonah or God's word to us today without a little background history. Nineveh was the capital city of the nation of Assyria. And that is important because Assyria had been a powerful force in its day. In fact Assyria had gone to war with Israel and had overthrown the northern part of the kingdom. Many Israelites died. Those who survived the war were taken into captivity. Similar to a 'chain gang' in old prison movies, the captives were linked together and forced to march to their new homes, not being chained together at the ankles or from the hands or at their waists - no, they were linked together with barbed fish hooks through the cheeks and connected from one person's cheek to the next persons cheek. Like a string of hooked fish they were pulled out of their world and led off into captivity. I don't think that we could ever really imagine how much hatred and anger the Israelites had for the Assyrians who had done such a thing to their people. Jonah was an Israelite. He hated the Assyrians and he hated the people of the capital city of Nineveh most of all. They represented everything that was evil and he just did not want to go there for any reason. He wanted God to destroy them. Why would God want him to go there? If it was just to prophesy their destruction that would be alright. But Jonah knew that God would give them a second chance if there was even the slightest reason to do so. God was far to merciful and Jonah was afraid. God better not have mercy on people that are that wicked and evil!

What amazes me is that we read the story of Jonah we stand in awe of a large fish swallowing a man and spiting him up on dry land as though that is the miracle of the text. The real miracle is that God forgives - even those horrible Ninevites Jonah want no part of it.

Oh, how easy it is to walk in the footsteps of Jonah - we understand Jonah - he probably had North Dakota roots somewhere. How hard it is to turn around and leave all of the anger and hatred that we are so comfortable with behind. And again I would ask, 'what would it take to leave our nets behind and follow God?

They are interesting Bible stories, aren't they? Do they have anything to do with us? Yes. Yes, everyday we are confronted with the question, will we stay with what is comfortable - often that is anger and hatred - or will we turn and leave it behind to follow Jesus? Are we really willing to follow Jesus?

In recent days I have been confronted with the question as a current new item that many of you have heard has drawn me to the emotions of Jonah. I am sure that most of you have heard the news reports concerning Sherry Arnold - the 43 year old teacher from Sidney, Mt. It is an incredible story that we heard about before it hit the news because Sherry is the niece of a dear friend. Both Shelly and I have spent some time with Sherry. When she went missing after she had gone for her morning jog we were asked to join those who were praying for her. Of course we know the story has not gone the way we had hoped or prayed. Two men have been arrested - one of which has confessed to the murder - the other only demanding a lawyer. And still Sherry's body has not been found. Our friend, Sherry's aunt, has shared with us some of the very personal family moments. Our friend shared that when the two men were arrested a sentiment was shared that I understand and would have quickly agreed to in the sorrow and anger of the moment. 'They should be taken into the center of Sidney and let the people of Sidney take care of them.' Boy can I understand that ... you and me and Jonah - we can all understand. But it was Sherry's mother, Sharon, that spoke up at that moments and said, 'Wait, we have to remember that they are God's children too. We need to pray for them.'

What is it that will make us drop our nets and turn away from that which is so comfortable and simply follow Jesus. Will it take a large fish swallowing us up and spitting us out on dry land. Does it take a tragedy of life and death proportions to get us to really think through how we are called to follow Jesus in our world.

I guess I don't really care if some people think that North Dakota is the place to go to see real cowboys. I don't really care if some don't understand what a ND winter can be like. But, boy I wish the world could see what it means to follow Christ. Sherry's mother reminded me of how 'life producing' the steps of Christ can be. Sharon, Sherry's mother told her family, 'the nation is watching now.' It is not the sensational stuff you will see in the news but it is walking humbly with our God.

I hate what the Assyrians did to the people of God all of those thousands of years ago. I think God does too. I hate what two men did to a fine young Montana woman in 2012 - I know that God does too. Both then and now it is comfortable to walk in the footsteps of Jonah. But will we drag those old nets and just stay with what is comfortable? Or will we turn to follow Christ where there is life eternal?

AMEN