

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 22 January 2012
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

This is Epiphany season when we focus on epiphanies, the manifestations of God's grace and glory in the world, the things in which we catch glimpses of the divine. With our three-year lectionary we have different epiphanies in the different years. Always we begin with the visit of the Magi followed by Jesus' baptism and conclude with the Transfiguration, but in between there is variety. This year's collection fits particularly well with today's collect.

"Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works ..."

Last week it was Philip and Nathanael whose calls we heard about, this week it is the pairs of fishing brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John. Their lives were totally disrupted as Jesus transformed them from people who caught fish to feed the hungry of Israel, to people who could catch the people themselves and show them 'the glory of God's marvelous works'.

In our opening hymn we sang about how Jesus calls *us*, not just long ago fisherfolk, "o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless seas." Last week Deacon Mimi talked to us about this call in our lives and how it can be manifested and how we can respond. The call comes to us anywhere and any time – "in our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease", as the hymn reminds us.

Whenever and wherever we are, the voice is calling us to see God's glory and help others to see it, as Peter and the other fishermen did. I think that many people envy the 'contented, peaceful fishermen' we sang about, imagining that things must have been much clearer for those who had Jesus walking among them and speaking with them directly. But we have the advantage of two thousand years of people reflecting on the meaning of Jesus Christ for our understanding of God, on the relationship that Christ is calling us into.

What does this week offer us in terms of 'perceiving the glory of God's marvelous works'?

In today's readings, before we heard about Jesus drawing the brothers away from their families and their livelihood, we heard a snippet of Jonah's story.

We are told that the disciples dropped everything and followed Jesus' call immediately. Not so with Jonah. In today's passage we find him preaching to those wicked Ninevites, but remember how it started. Jonah was happily working at his job in Joppa when he heard God calling him. At first he tried to ignore it, but when that did not work, he did indeed drop everything – and run away. He thought that if he left his work and family and ran as far as possible in the opposite direction to his call, he could escape the unpleasant task God had laid before him.

And we know how well that worked. He nearly caused the sinking of a ship. He nearly

drowned. He was swallowed by a great fish and spit up on the seashore. So Jonah did not respond to God's call out of inspiration or loyalty or devotion, but out of sheer desperation.

He was disgusted and terrified by the reputation of the Ninevites as a violent, godless, sinful people. He wanted nothing to do with them.

He would have been perfectly happy to have God wipe them off the face of the earth and save him the trouble of talking with them.

But Jonah was called, and God was relentless, would not let him go. So today we hear of Jonah going into that terrifying alien city (after a long and lonely overland journey) – and the people listen to him.

They must have been surprised to see this stranger coming bravely into their magnificent city and calling their attention to all the ways that they were failing to live as God called them to live. They were surprised, but they listened. They examined their lives and realized that they had indeed wandered far from how people ought to live. They thought this scruffy stranger might indeed be right, and that they had departed so far from the way people ought to live that God would simply obliterate them.

They thought it might be true, but that perhaps they could fix things. So the whole city stopped everything they were doing and prayed. They repented in sackcloth and ashes, expressing their sincere regret for their evil ways and their intention to do better in the future. They even put sackcloth and ashes on their animals to show their intention to remodel every aspect of their lives.

And this sincere listening and repentance brought them great blessings. I am sure that the residents of Nineveh saw 'the glory of God's marvelous works' in that experience. They all emerged from the experience with wonderful stories to tell of God's infinite mercy.

But what about Jonah? Jonah was furious with God. All against his will, he preached to the Ninevites and pronounced the judgement of God upon them, the end of the world as they had known it – and God changed God's mind.

Jonah felt a fool. Instead of marveling at the glory of God's infinite mercy, able to forgive even the reprobate Ninevites, all Jonah could think about was his own reputation. He pouted and sulked and even when God tried a living metaphor with the quick growth and death of the castorbean plant, Jonah remained, as he put it, 'angry enough to die'.

Jonah was called, and responded, eventually and against his will. But Jonah utterly failed to see the glory, to appreciate the infinite love and mercy of God – even for the Ninevites – and all their animals.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works;

Jonah proclaimed not God's salvation, but God's destruction – and could not rejoice in the salvation even when he saw it first hand. We are all continually called into relationship with God, to be people of God who witness to the world the Good News of God in Christ. We are all called and we may be reluctant, as Jonah was. If we are reluctant, we know the call will pursue us. We do not want to be like Jonah, fixed on judgement and wrath. We want to see the glory and show it to other people.

This is the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, stretching from the Confession of Peter last Wednesday through the Conversion of Paul next Wednesday. Looking at this modern movement to draw all of the churches together in common witness to Christ, to the 'glory of God's marvelous works', we can see the work of God in the coming together of such different groups with such divided history.

Our lives are indeed filled with tumult and restlessness, but in forgiveness, and unity, and generosity, in all the ways that faithful people work together to serve the world, to build up the Kingdom of God, that is where we see God's glory, where we find the wondrous love which we can proclaim to everyone.

Peter saw it and startled everyone with his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of God. Paul saw it when he was struck blind on the road to Damascus and spent the rest of his life proclaiming the glory of God's marvelous works all over the eastern Mediterranean. His proclamation remains to us in the scriptures we hear and read and which have helped to form our understanding for nearly 2000 years.

My prayer is that each of us responds to the unique calls in our hearts, opening our eyes and ears to experience the wonder of God's saving love all around us – and proclaiming it joyfully, in word and deed wherever we go.