

The third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 25, 2015 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Psalm 62: 6-14, 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31, Mark 1:14-20

It's hard to mistake what Paul says in the Epistle today: "the time's they are a-changin'!" "For the present form of this world is passing away" – things are going to be different – very different. So don't allow yourself to be tied down by things - don't allow any distractions – focus – be prepared, be ready to respond at a moment's notice.

It's easy, in this day and age, to think of those doom-and-gloom street corner preachers who proclaim that "the end of the world is nigh" – partly, I think, because it does seem like the world we all like to remember – the more settled, less phrenetic, world where there seemed to be more certainty and less doubt, more security and less uncertainty – it does seem that that sort of world is indeed passing away, and doing so very quickly, too.

That was the world Jonah inhabited, and Paul. That was the world of Jesus' call to his disciples. Forget "Mutual Assured Destruction" and think of it as a one-way street: only the inhabitants of Ninevah were going to get it in the neck. And, likewise – in the face of the highly efficient Roman Empire's equivalent of the 82nd Airborne Division confronting peasants with pitchforks only Jewish corpses would be scattered across Jerusalem's hills in the two Jewish revolts. In the world of Jesus' time, much was changing, and none of it was good.

In the face of what must have felt like impending doom, God spoke. God spoke in many ways, to Jonah, and Paul's correspondents, and Peter and Andrew and James and John but in the end the message behind words was the same: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

- As the world changes in surprising and unpredictable ways, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."
- As the people and things you thought you could trust in pass on and pass away, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."
- As the communities and institutions that always seemed to be so reliably unchanging suddenly become almost unrecognizable, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Fear can have a paralyzing effect on anyone. It numbs our senses and delay's our responses.

And fear has a twin: denial (not just a river in Egypt!). How much easier, in the face of fear's incessant knocking, to pull the bedcovers over our heads and pretend we can't hear anything, that it's just the wind.

It's not the voice of God that tells us that lie.

In each of the readings, action's called for. Its almost as if there's another half to that "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" line: "but don't just sit there; **DO** something!!"

That "something" was quite specific:

- For Jonah: "Go to Ninevah with this message about change"

- For Paul's community in Corinth: "strip the decks for action, change is coming"
- For the four fishermen: "follow me and the sort of things you fish for is going to change radically!!"

In each case the charge had to do with "Good News" (though the Ninevians might not necessarily have thought so, at least at first!). In each case change was involved. In each case it was God-authored change. In each case it was good.

And in each case not everyone really wanted to face it and embrace it. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid, but don't just sit there; **DO** something!!"

Yesterday, your vestry - the leaders of this congregation - met for a day of reflection, learning, and planning. I'm going to let them tell you how they felt yesterday went, but for me it was a very positive experience; I sensed a collective exhale of held breath. It was as if we all heard that phrase: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," AND we also heard that second phrase: "but don't just sit there; **DO** something!!" You'll hear more at our Annual Meeting on February 8, so mark your calendars (or the electronic equivalent thereof) and plan to be there.

In the greater scheme of things, though, the call to not just sit there but **DO** something is addressed to all of us. Genuine faith, the Epistle to James reminds us, is seen in both the spiritual AND the physical response to God's call, the prayerful and the active, the word and the deed.

And to bring this thought full-circle, change is good. Unless you're a rock the absence of change means the presence of death! And, of course, vice versa. So as this tsunami of change sweeps toward you, God's invitation is that now would be a good time to learn to surf. Try it, you might find you like it! Amen.