

# Sermon: Epiphany 3

*January 25, 2009*

## Introduction

The passage from the *Book of Jonah* produced a wry smile on my face. His assignment from the Lord was to go to the great, but notorious city of Nineveh and caused them to cease their brutal and oppositional ways toward Israel. He went to Nineveh, got the people's and the king's attention and achieved a 180 in their behavior.

Oh how our new President would like to have *that* kind of power and influence! There was a "carrot and stick" proposition made to the people by Jonah, and it worked.

Jonah had wanted no part of the call by God to go there, he caused quite a ruckus, but found it in his heart to give thanks to God when he found himself in great distress and reconsidered his call. Three days in a whale's belly can do wonders!

Talk about a reluctant prophet... The beauty of the satirical *Book of Jonah* is that we can so readily identify with the universal reluctance to respond to what we are called to do by God. That's where repentance comes into the picture for Jonah and for us.

In addition to the repentance message we hear in the book of Jonah, there is another dimension to the story, one that helps us understand why this reading is among our readings after the Feast of the Epiphany. Remember that one of the underlying themes of The Epiphany is the criss-cross of Jew and Gentile.

Remember that the three wise men, or Magi, were not Jews, but foreigners from the East. Remember that Epiphany means "manifestation," or "showing" and that

the showing...literally the “showing up” of Jonah in Nineveh was mighty unusual. A Hebrew in Assyria? Not the expected thing.

A stranger in a strange land for sure, and his presence in Nineveh follows the tale of Jonah trying to escape the Lord’s voice by jumping on a ship to Tarshish, a western seaport on the outer edge of the then-known world. He really did try to go as far away from the Lord’s voice as he could imagine!

The ship captain and crew were not Hebrews. They were Gentiles. That is the “ahah,” the moment of epiphany, when we come to understand that the relationship between Gentile and Jew is important in the *Book of Jonah*. These Gentiles turned to the Hebrew God for salvation and the Lord delivered them from the raging storm. That’s the point where Jonah gets swallowed up by the whale, has three days of lament, and emerges empowered to make the trek to Nineveh.

“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” cried Jonah. The king and his people got the message, donned sack cloths and ashes, fasted with repentance and there were *no* exceptions. Even the animals! Would that Jonah could have been so successful with his own people!

As the story goes, when God saw what the people did, how they turned from their evil ways to turn to Him, God spared them the threatened calamity.

## **Washington**

Nineveh took three days to walk across. I felt as if it were three days of walking to and from Capitol Hill last Tuesday, Inauguration Day, in our great capitol city, Washington! My daughter Sara and I were among the throngs of peoples of every race and nation making the pilgrimage to the West front of the Capitol to witness the swearing in of a remarkable person, Barack Obama, to become the 44<sup>th</sup> President of our United States of America.

It was thrilling, if freezing. Our seats were well positioned, and I was overcome with appreciation for my husband’s service in Congress for the three terms he served in the House of Representatives in the early sixties, during which time he

voted for every piece of Civil Rights legislation. When I turned around and gazed across the huddled masses clear across to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, I recalled that my husband, Bob, had taken a bus with other Members to listen to Martin Luther King, Jr., in the late hot summer of 1963 address the throngs of marchers with his famous *I Have a Dream Speech*. That day some Members of Congress heckled those who chose to go. I, like most of you, listened to that speech on television, and knew something new had happened in our country.

Tuesday, something old and something new happened in our country.

What was old, was the transfer of enormous power of one political group to another. What was new was that a man of color became President of the most powerful country in the world. Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States with an unprecedented carpet of humanity serving as witnesses...1.8 million persons withstanding seriously cold weather, but feasting in the bounty of a great blue sky and gentle breeze at noon on Tuesday. (That breeze would pick up considerably after the Inauguration concluded.) Republicans, Democrats, Independents—all—came together to celebrate a new way of thinking, of being and hoping. We all looked at the same powerful symbol of freedom...the red, white and blue...waving in the brisk breeze and gave a collective silent thanks. It was a spiritual moment for sure.

It was an historic day for many reasons, not the least of which is because this was the 44<sup>th</sup> time that a peaceful transition of power took place in American history. If make an exception for the Civil War, when the transition was peaceful but nothing else was, that is an extraordinary record; and every time the United States ends one presidency and begins another one, it is an extraordinary event... not to be taken for granted, as I was reminded by my driver here in San Diego late Wednesday evening. He became a citizen 11 years ago, a refugee from a country without such peaceful political transitions: Iran.

### **Biblical message: call**

The Inaugural speech coheres with the Biblical message not only of today's lessons, but with the entire sweep of the Bible. That is not to say that the Bible is

a democratic document or a republican document. It is to say that the call for us as a nation to renew our commitment to responsibility to our nation and to one another is inherently Biblical. As Christians we are called to God's service.

As Americans, we do not have to be Christians, of course. Not in our day. As our new President reminded us, we are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and non believers. He reminded us that we are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth...and as the world grows smaller our common humanity shall reveal itself; that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace. He included a unique call for us as Americans in these words: "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." A 21<sup>st</sup> century Epiphany call perhaps...beyond Jew and Gentile.

You and I *are* Christians, however, and we must address this question: what are we called to do as Christians in the world as it is now? Today and tomorrow. How do we best garner our abilities and resources to bless this world and its peoples? Do we keep "keeping on" or do we stop, breath, think and pray about who we are as a church, a parish, a diocese and as individuals and families?

As Christians, aren't we called by God, in our Baptismal covenant, to examine *our* roles and responsibilities in this world? I think so. Aren't we part of the very nation that the President asks to make sacrifices in serving the nation, the world, and our neighbors? I think so. Aren't we called to live and work and have our being alongside persons of other faiths and peoples of no faith, as Americans...and with our global neighbors and partners? I think so.

It is a vital 21<sup>st</sup> century question! How do we participate in the new world order, with integrity and with moral fiber as Christians in America? I urge us as a parish to embrace these questions, using this opportunity of new American leadership as a springboard to challenge ourselves to come up with fresh strategies to engage with the rest of the world in promoting peace and justice...including peace among ourselves.

## **Responsibility and Spirituality**

We are grounded in spirituality with our liturgy. My prayer is that our liturgy will continue to strengthen us all to hear God's call to us in how we pray, live, and serve our church, our neighbor and our wider world. My prayer is that we embrace renewed gratitude that we live in a country in which our Christian ideas and moral grounding are part and parcel of national life. I fully realize that we have important separations of "church and state" and that sometimes the boundaries are not perfectly clear and that sometimes litigation is required; however, I come from a week in Washington in which I once again remembered that everytime we welcome a newly elected President into the most powerful leadership position in the world, that President begins the first day of work by attending the Presidential Inaugural Prayer Service at the Washington National Cathedral.

It is attended not only by the President and Vice-President, but also, by Members of Congress, the Supreme Court, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Diplomatic Corps, along with Interfaith Leaders and invited guests.

*The National Prayer Service in Celebration of The Fifty-Sixth Presidential Inauguration* was majestic: preludes, processions, welcomes, invocations, the National Anthem sung by all, readings, prayers for civil rulers, psalms, hymns, a splendid sermon, anthems, more prayers, a prayer for the nation—all offered by a panoply of interfaith leaders-- made up the fabric of the service. The spirit was electric, in a quiet way, and we broke all the rules by standing up, clapping and weeping when the most moving rendition of *Amazing Grace* any of us had ever heard was sung from the lectern by an African American man. Even my son, Jack, standing on the aisle next to me, had tears glistening on his cheeks. As the President and Mrs. Obama and Vice President and Dr. Biden walked out the North Transept, both my son Jack and I had the opportunity to shake hands with our new President on his first day of work. What a thrill!

### **Concluding words**

May we give deep thanks this third Sunday after the Epiphany that we have an opportunity to be fully participating Christians in the national call to new levels of service and responsibility. I think the prophet Jonah would be in accord, and I am

quite confident that Our Lord is calling you and me to a renewed spirit of prayer, love, and service. I will close this sermon with the closing prayer offered by our Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church at the Inaugural Prayer Service, drawn in part from Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural Address of March 4, 1865:

***On this radiant day we give thanks to you, O God,  
for the freedom to gather united in prayer.***

***Strengthen and sustain Barack, our President,  
that in the days to come he may lead your people  
with confidence and compassion.***

***Grant patience and perseverance to the people of this Nation.  
With malice toward none, with charity for all,  
may we strive to finish the work you have given us to do  
that we may achieve a just and lasting peace.***

***In this time of new beginnings, new ventures and new visions,  
light in us the fire of justice, and the passion for forgiveness.***

***Give us the strength to hold fast to what is good***

***That we may go forth renewed and committed to make hope a reality. AMEN.***

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