

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalms 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

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Our readings today are about sudden drastic changes in peoples' lives. Jonah's mission to the Ninevites has hardly gotten under way, when the whole massive, sinful city suddenly repents and turns to God. Paul insists that Corinthians who have spouses should begin immediately to live as though they had none. Those who are weeping should promptly act as if they were not. Those who are rejoicing should behave as if they were not, and so on. In our Gospel, one minute Simon, Andrew, James and John are fishermen plying their trade. The next minute they have abandoned everything to become followers of Christ.

These instances of rapid, fundamental, change are especially interesting to us, because we are sometimes tempted to despair of the possibility of real change in our *own* lives. Particularly at this time of year, when New Year's resolutions have begun to waver and fail, we begin to suspect that the sinful patterns of our lives are cut in stone. So let's take a look at the drastic changes that occur in the lives of the people in our readings. I think we will find that something different is going on in each instance, and that each has implications for our own efforts to become the people Christ calls us to be.

Many of us know people who have changed their behavior overnight because a doctor said to them, "If you take another drink it will kill you," or "One more pack of cigarettes and you'd better start putting your

affairs in order.” This kind of ultimatum can concentrate the mind wonderfully. It’s the kind of stark choice that Jonah offers to the Ninevites: “Repent immediately or be utterly destroyed.”

There is no denying that there is an element of this in Christianity. After all, when it comes down to it, we are offered a choice of heaven, or hell. But in the life of faith, we can’t be terrified into changing in ways that are fundamental and enduring. Resolutions made simply to avoid eternal damnation don’t last. It’s just human nature. Real change does not result from avoiding something; it comes from embracing something. It results from saying “yes.” I set before you life and death. Choose life. Don’t just reject death. *Choose* life!

It’s 8:30 at night and you are still at the office. You glance around the neon-lit room, and notice the other desks are empty. Everyone else has gone home. Your own desk is cluttered with a half-finished quarterly report, a cold, gelatinous, Chinese take-out in a leaky white carton, and a telephone with its “do not disturb” button blinking. You can’t decide which is worse: your headache or your heartburn. You could have finished the report hours ago -- days ago. But this can’t be just another report. It has to be a masterpiece.

The big promotion you’ve been working for is so close you can smell it. It’s the promotion that’s going to move you down the hall into the corner office with the Persian rugs and the private secretary. Heaven knows your job performance has been good enough. At this point it’s mostly a question of office politics. For the hundredth time you check-off in your mind all of your allies, and line them up against your rivals. You try, yet again, to interpret the cryptic remarks of board members.

One of the cleaners hands you a garbled note taken by the security guard downstairs on the switchboard: Your child has been in an accident and has been taken to the hospital. *Right now*, before you get to the hospital and find that it's only a sprained ankle and a couple of stitches; *right now*, how important is your promotion to you? How do you feel about all the hours and all the anxiety you've been pouring into trying to impress the regional vice-president of domestic operations? In a moment all of that is forgotten, as you stand face to face with what really matters.

Something like this is behind St. Paul's remarks today. Forget about your joys and your sorrows, about who you know and what you own. The world as we know it is passing away. The Lord is coming. How do you stand with him? After a life of scholarship that would enrich the Church ever after, St. Thomas Aquinas, in a moment of revelation, had his first real glimpse of God. In that moment, Thomas said of his life's work, "It's all straw." Such an insight can change our lives in a moment, forever.

On a bright summer afternoon some children are arguing about whose turn it is to play with a new toy. The dispute grows loud, and a general melee is threatened. Suddenly, familiar music is heard above the tumult, and someone notices that the neighborhood ice-cream van has rounded the corner, and is coming down the street. Now the argument is forgotten, as the children charge off to their respective homes to beg some pocket change before the van gets away. The new toy lies unregarded in the dust.

Most adults wouldn't run too far for an ice cream. Is there anything that *would* make us break off the usual patterns of our lives, and set off

in a completely new direction? For the fishermen in our Gospel, a word from Jesus is enough to bring about this change. There he is, walking along the shore of the lake: the personification of all their hopes. He pauses, and speaks a word to them. If they don't reply, he may keep on walking. So they act. Now. And so it is for us. We have heard his Word proclaimed. We meet him in our Eucharist. How will we respond?