

THE SIGN OF JONAH

I wish to begin this Advent by suggesting – not declaring or insisting, but suggesting – that we do not really know the meaning of the verb phrase “to repent.” Further, it is my assumption (and much more) that if the concept and possibility of repentance come clear for us, it will be the greatest Advent and Christmas season we have ever had.

Hearing this, a wide-awake parishioner might begin to jump to several conclusions. First, one might say to one’s self: “We are going to hear a lot about repentance this Christmas season, and that’s not my favorite subject. He may be able to support it with Scripture, but that’s not my idea of a very good flavor for Christmas time.” (Ah, but remember: there is the possibility that repentance does not mean what you think.)

Second, a wide-awake parishioner might reason as follows: “Ho, ho ... he thinks he’s on to something. Everybody has heard about repentance forever, and he must know the normal connotation. He must have thought a long time about making ‘repentance’ the major theme for a whole Advent season. I wonder what he has stumbled onto.” (A wide-awake and wise parishioner might reason thus.)

Third, a wide-awake parishioner might even be thinking: “If repentance is not what we have been assuming all along, yet we know it is such a big theme in the Bible, I wonder what the real requirement is. If I don’t know what it means, I wonder: Have I ever repented? What is repentance, and what happens when you do it?” (Interesting thought, you must agree: Have you ever repented?)

Twice in Matthew and once in Luke we get the same scenario. Scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, and the whole generation seek a sign. It is perfectly logical and understandable. Jesus is doing incredible things – teaching dramatic new ways of looking at Life and understanding what God is like and what God wants of us. But who is this Jesus? What if He is wrong? Of course they seek a sign! Who wouldn’t? It is imperative that they get some clue, some indication, some encouragement to go on taking Jesus seriously. It is a high compliment that they even seek a sign from Him. If Jesus had not been so incredible among them already, they would have paid him no mind. Obviously He has them partly hooked. They are getting

uncomfortable about just ignoring Him or writing Him off as a crackpot. But they need something more now. It's getting serious – maybe even dangerous.

“Please,” they seem to be saying, “please help us. We want to be cooperative; we want to be helpful; we want to be on your side if you are authentic. But frankly you scare us to death. What if we come with you and it turns out we are betraying Moses and the God of our fathers? If you have the kind of power and authority you seem to, then be reasonable: Give us some sign we cannot mistrust. Free us from this horrible doubt and uncertainty. Put us out of the misery of being almost convinced! Give us a sign, for Christ’s sake!”

In ways only slightly veiled, our own generation seeks a sign too. It is particularly noticable during the Christmas season. It is not only the unknown element of Jesus’s new WAY, but also the mounting devastation of the old ways catching up with us. And more of us each day wonder if it’s too late, no matter *what* way is chosen from here on. We seek a sign also: some sign of hope, of peace, of love; some reason to go on believing that there can be prosperity for more than a few; some sign that maybe even yet, everything can still be all right. The Christmas season brings it out – an almost clawing, desperate determination to “make Christmas be meaningful and beautiful,” like it used to be when we were young and innocent.

Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and whole generation are seeking a sign, and Jesus says, “*No sign shall be given ... except the sign of Jonah.*”

Somehow, though it is neither stated nor necessarily implied, we come away convinced that this is a put-down. We hear it as a reduction. “You miserable black-hearts want a great, big, beautiful sign, but I will give you only a measly, little, obscure one. You want miracles, portents, happenings, proofs, but I will give you only this riddle – this obtuse Sign of Jonah.”

That is the way the passages sound to most of us at first blush, and I have sat in study group after study group where people never do come to a clear conviction about what the Sign of Jonah really is.

A very quick refresher course: Jonah was asked by God to go to Nineveh and warn the citizens of the wrath to come – they were about to be destroyed. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, an empire that

THE SIGN OF JONAH

had destroyed Israel and, except for Jerusalem, Judah as well. In short, Jonah had as much liking for Nineveh as a modern Jew would have for Berlin if it still represented Hitler's Third Reich. So Jonah did not want to warn Nineveh! He hoped to God that it would be utterly destroyed. He took ship for Tarshish – the other end of the world – hoping to escape his mission.

Three days later, at the bottom of the sea, in the belly of a great fish, Jonah began to rethink his decision. Finally he said, "Okay, God. You're bigger than I am. I will do whatever you say." So the fish vomited Jonah out onto dry land. And God did not apologize for being a big bully or anything. God just said, "Go do what I told you to do the first time."

Nineveh was a huge city – three days' journey in breadth – and Jonah was the most effective preacher who ever lived. He walked one full day into the city and uttered one sentence, and the entire city from King to beast of burden repented in sackcloth and ashes and by fasting. Naturally Jonah was devastated, having hoped so fervently that nobody would hear his sermon or pay him any mind. And sure enough, just as he had feared, God forgave the city and averted the punishment. So Jonah went outside the city and had a big pout – a veritable banquet of self-pity, suicidal sentiments, and odes to "ain't it awful." And that's the story of Jonah.

"No sign shall be given ... except the sign of Jonah." But maybe that is not Jesus being stingy. Maybe the Sign of Jonah is the biggest, the best, the most important sign there is. Maybe it's a straight answer to a difficult request, and maybe most of those who are seeking a sign miss it because, as usual, it is not what they think they want. Maybe it's another case of, "When you care enough to send the very best." So Jesus does not dilute it, confuse it, or tease with small bits and pieces of the answer. He says, in effect, "The sign you seek is not on the outside. It is on the inside. Repent. You can only know me – know who I really am and what I am about – through repentance."

I am reminded of the time when Moses wanted reassurance that God was really God. He was about to head back into Egypt to confront Pharaoh with a demand for his people's deliverance. He was already wanted for murder; the chances of his coming out of this assignment alive seemed nil. So Moses said it would be nice if he had some sign that this "voice in his head," or whatever it was that was sending him on this impossible mission, was really the true and powerful God it

claimed to be. And The Voice replied: “Well, it’s really simple to prove. I ask you to go get MY people from slavery in Egypt and bring them back here with you to meet ME on this holy mountain. When you get back here with the people, you will know I AM WHO I SAY I AM.” And Moses said, “Yeah, I guess that’s right. If you aren’t God, there is no way in Heaven above or Hell beneath that I will ever pull it off.” “See?” said God. “It’s simple. Now get busy – you’re wasting time.”

Like Father, like Son. We catch a little of that same kind of reasoning here as Jesus offers the Sign of Jonah. The people want to know: “How can we be sure, really sure, that you are the Messiah – that you have authority enough for us to follow you? Give us a sign that will make us sure.” And the message behind Jesus’ reply is: “If you change your whole way of life because of me, then you will know that I am who you suspect I am. Because, after all, you do not have the power to change your lives that much unless I help you. And I cannot help you that much unless I am who you are afraid I might be.”

The Sign of Jonah is REPENTANCE. That is what the story is about. Jonah repents to get out of the fish. Nineveh repents its former ways and is spared. God repents of his wrath and withdraws the destruction. Unfortunately, Jonah is unrepentant of his desire to see Nineveh destroyed, and the story leaves us with a picture of how miserable, pointless, stupid, and evil that really is.

The Sign of Jonah is REPENTANCE. Everywhere you look, that is the major theme. Some people, however, say the Sign of Jonah is the crucifixion and resurrection: Jonah is in the fish three days, as Jesus will be dead for three days. Then Jonah comes out of the depths, as Jesus will rise from the grave. That leaves a lot missing, and it gets us stuck early in Jonah’s story without knowing what to do with the major events that follow. But if you like that, go for it. After all, what is the purpose of the crucifixion and resurrection? Right! To reassure us of the power of God’s love and the reality of the realms to come – that we might repent now, while we are still in this life. The Sign of Jonah is REPENTANCE. Any way you come at it, REPENTANCE is the big theme and the Sign of Jonah.

The Sign of Jonah is the biggest, the best, the ultimate sign that Jesus can offer in the context of the people’s perplexity. They want reassurance, enough to rise above their fears and anxieties – enough to trust and follow Him. And Jesus has to find some way to tell them

it doesn't work that way. They must follow by what they have already seen and heard, and only in that way can they taste, experience, and find out for real that the WAY of Life He is calling them to is true and real. The Ninevites are not promised deliverance from disaster first and *then* they repent. First they repent, and then they find, to their utter amazement, that the disaster has been averted. The story is not about how repentance works; we shall come to that later. The story does remind us that things work according to design. First the repentance, then the results of repentance – not vice versa.

Why do I think this has something to do with Christmas? There are lots of reasons – some of which I will tell you later; some of which you can already see and feel coming. I suspect that the principles have not changed: We also must follow by what we have already seen and heard so far – by tasting and experiencing and finding out for ourselves that the WAY of Life Jesus calls us into is true and real. It works the same way for us too. First we repent, then we discover that Life is really different for us and that certain kinds of disasters have been averted. (Spiritual death, meaninglessness, despair, hubris – to name just a few.) But today we focus on Jesus' eerie statement: *“No sign shall be given to it except for the sign of the prophet Jonah.”*

If that is the summation Jesus gives to His own generation, then it is the summation of what Christmas is about. Jesus comes. We see healings and other miracles, but we do not know what to make of it. We hear incredible teachings and parables and principles, but we wonder if we can really trust them. So we seek a sign – some way to be certain; some miracle to make us sure. The sign we seek is the Sign of Jonah: REPENTANCE. No other sign – meaning, none better – can be given. The Sign of Jonah is REPENTANCE. And so the essence of Christmas – the coming of Christ – is also repentance. That is the top of the line. That is what it is all heading for and leading up to. We will know as we ourselves repent. Otherwise, we will not know.

Not so very long ago in the Midwest, a congregation welcomed its new preacher to town, and almost everybody turned out to hear his first sermon. The Deacons met that same afternoon, as they normally did in that church. They were pleased. The sermon had been very good. It had been on the subject of repentance. A lot of people had spoken highly of the sermon. It reminded many of them of something a lot of other people should hear. In fact, at moments it had been downright powerful. One Deacon finally summed it up for them all: “If I hadn't had my guard up so high, I would have been deeply moved.”

THE SIGN OF JONAH

The next Sunday almost as many people came as had the first week. And the sermon was just as good. In fact, it was exactly the same sermon. The Deacons were not quite so pleased when they met that afternoon, but they tried to be understanding. A new parish puts many demands on a preacher; he was young; maybe he simply hadn't had time to prepare a new sermon. Anyway, they would show Christian patience and charity.

The third Sunday not so many people came. Everybody smiled and was nice, but you could tell things were just a little nervous and edgy. And sure enough, the pastor preached exactly the same sermon. This time the Deacons decided they should talk with the new pastor. So they all got together that evening in the Head Deacon's home. They told the young preacher how glad they were he had come, how fine his first sermon had been, and how everybody seemed to like him, and that they all looked forward to a very fine ministry together. However, there was just this one puzzling item: For three Sundays in a row, there had been exactly the same sermon. Attendance had already fallen off. What a shame if just when things were about to be so good, something should turn it all downhill. Was there some explanation?

"Well," said the young preacher, "I have a lot of sermons I'm just fairly busting to preach. And in my way of thinking, each one is a bit better than the one before it. But I'm frankly a little upset here. I preached a sermon on repentance – the very best I know how to preach – and you people haven't repented. It's not going to do any good for me to go on talking about steps two, three, or four until this church has decided to take the first step. And the first step is repentance. So I guess I'll just have to keep preaching the same sermon until this congregation decides to repent."

How I chuckle at that story and admire the message. Not that I have the moxie to pull the same thing. But the trouble around here is that some of us have not decided to repent. And some of us do not know how. And some of us are discovering that it takes more than one effort. In any case, to begin Advent and prepare for Christmas, we all need to repent. I preach this sermon to ask you to get ready to do that. Repentance is far more beautiful than most people realize. And what *is* repentance? We have not come to that yet. Had to save something for next Sunday.