

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
November 8, 2009
23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Year B**

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

I am going to do something this morning that I am not really supposed to do. I am going to deviate from the lectionary in my remarks. They give us a carefully set out list of readings for a reason. The readings follow the seasons of the church year, and they tell the story of the faith with themes and threads. It is supposed to be a big help for people listening to the Scriptures read, and to reinforce the themes and drive the points home, it does not make much sense to just preach on whatever we feel like.

The problem is that I read today's readings, and I see a sermon on stewardship. In I Kings, there is a widow giving the prophet from what little she has, and she is blessed for her generosity. In the Gospel we have another widow giving from what little she has in the temple, and Jesus uses her as a model for charity.

The problem is that I am not ready for a sermon on stewardship. You may not be ready to hear one. My hope is to send out a stewardship letter about the end of this month, so the message is on its way. The time is not ripe.

In the seasons of the church year, the next one coming up is Advent. We have two more weeks of ordinary time, and then the new year starts 11/29. Advent is a season of watching and waiting, and so I should be preaching on that in a couple of weeks and not now. The problem is that I am watching and waiting now, and so I am going to put the lectionary aside for a bit and come back to it next week.

As you folks know, I had my oral exams with the Board of Examining Chaplains yesterday. I spent the week agonizing over ideas and wanting to do well. Then yesterday, I went and got the Q & A. When Susan went through this a few years ago, they had coffee and rolls. She said it was fairly friendly, and they bought her lunch as part of the deal. I had no coffee and no rolls. There was no free lunch. I tried to answer questions on my three assigned topics for two hours and then went home while they stayed to talk.

So you can see what I have been watching and waiting for. It is the email from the Vocations Director or the phone call. I want some feedback.

I have an alternative reading for you this morning, and it is from Jonah. It is a reading that we skip right over in the three year cycle of lectionary readings, so even if you were here every Sunday, you would not hear it. That seems like a good enough reason to use it.

Here is Jonah 1:17

“But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.”

I am pretty sure you can see why I am identifying with Jonah here. He has been swallowed up by something, and is in the dark. We know how the story ends, but even if Jonah knew he was getting out after three days, he can't exactly check his watch. They did not have cell phones back then, and I am not sure how many bars you would get inside a fish anyway. Jonah is watching and waiting.

My guess is that all of us have had these Jonah experiences. You find yourself bogged down in something. Suddenly you are doing inventory at the store or taxes for a parent's estate or a book order for the middle school after the secretary got laid off. I'll let you supply your own fish. I trust each of us can think of a “belly of the fish” moment in our own lives. I have had more than one myself, but I will spare you.

I have a couple of points to make about these “belly of the fish” experiences. Part of this may be whistling in the dark, but I have thought about this a lot, and I am going to share.

First, the thing that no one ever notices is that the Lord provides this giant fish. This experience is not intended as punishment. God does not inflict Jonah with this experience, he provides it. God is good, and he loves us as children of God. I provide all manner of things for my children, and while they may not think much of some of them, I provide in love.

While the thing may not look like much while we are living it, I claim those belly of the fish experiences are all opportunities for growth. God gives them to us, and there is a reason. Part of the challenge to us may be to figure out the point and pray to understand the benefit, but we should have faith that God is not capricious, and He is not just playing around with us.

The second thing is that the story has a happy ending. You and I know this because we remember Jonah from Sunday School or watching Veggie Tales with the nieces and nephews. Jonah does get out, and he does not seem to have any lasting ill effects that we are told about in the Scriptures.

To paraphrase these last two points, these experiences are not punishment, and they are not eternal. They may seem like punishment or an exercise in eternity it at the time, but these things will pass, and we will be better people for having handled them with grace.

As my last point about Jonah, he does not have a single transformative experience and then is completely different. You may remember that Jonah does the job God gave him and then gets mad when the people of Nineveh listen to him and repent. It is like Jonah needs another loving

lesson from God, and he gets one with a bush that dies. We all have a series of these giant fish experiences in our lives, and some of us are faster learners than others I guess.

I am waiting for The Lord to speak to my fish, and for it to spew this Jonah out upon the dry land. I am praying that any of you who can identify with this sermon get spit out soon too. Until it happens though, we need to live in the faith that it is not punishment, and it is not eternal.

We watch and we wait. We trust in God, and we pray for the strength to do His will.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen