

“THE HESITANT DOVE”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2018

Text: Jonah

The story of Jonah is poorly represented by the short sample we had for our first reading. I hope you remember more of the story. Not just the part about the great fish swallowing Jonah; but especially how disappointed Jonah was when God showed mercy to Nineveh. The main point of the book is how forcefully God rebuked Jonah for taking exception to God’s forgiveness of hundreds of thousands of Ninevites.

Hence, I want to share . . .

An apocryphal story: “The Hesitant Dove.”

Once upon a time the Dove, a lovely messenger of God because it is at home between heaven and earth, was summoned to deliver a message.

“Go, bring this olive branch to the old man Noah captaining yon boat. Tell him God has mercy—and soon he will find land.”

The dove said “Are you quite sure? Shouldn’t we just be done with these leftovers? How about you start over on a planet with no heritage of wickedness? I would bet that things will work out just the same the second time around!”

But God said “Go. This is my will.” And he flew off.

But the Dove was right. Wickedness still found a place on earth even after the flood.

So the next time God sought out the dove to make a special delivery, it was even more reluctant to get involved. Instead of carrying God’s word to Nineveh, it flew in the other direction. But God pursued the Dove with wind and sea and a great fish and sent it willy-nilly to Nineveh. There the Dove announced God’s message all over the city. “Nineveh will be overthrown in forty days!”

And just as the dove had feared, God did not follow through. God “went all soft” on Nineveh and let them live because they heard and believed and repented.

The Discredited Dove pouted over God’s changeability. (The dove is famous not for rejoicing but for mourning!)

Yet the merciful God was merciful even to the reluctant dove. Jonah (oh! —*the word for dove in Hebrew is Jonah!*) received a scolding . . . for not thinking like God. For preferring judgment to mercy. For being quick to condemn, slow to forgive. For the Lord (Exodus 34:6), the Lord, is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

Many years later, the chastened Dove, lovely messenger of God, was given a very special mission:

“Go, hover over that man being baptized in the Jordan River. Be a sign to people that my love and mercy will be personified in that man. They will see my face in his. They will know my mercy and peace through him.”

By now, the dove knew better than to talk back. He appeared over Jesus, commending him to all people. Believing the dove, the disciples walked with Jesus. But they were hesitant at times, hardly believing that the news could be as good as God said. They tended to close ranks and regard discipleship as their property. They stopped children from getting too close. Another time, Luke says,

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;

but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" [shades of the reluctant dove] But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

A couple years later, windsound-and-firetongues were given the task: God sent them from heaven upon the church, the body of his crucified-resurrected-and-ascended Son. The day was Pentecost.

God charged the church with proclaiming resurrection and new life. It was like the old mercy-song. But this time it was more commanding than wistful. Resurrection and new life are always a relevant and joyful message in a world in which wickedness and violence are never out of style. But our God is a savior God, whose will it is that—even amid evil—no one should perish but all should live in love and peace.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about good things happening to bad people. Which, to good people (or to those who are good in their own eyes), is equally as troubling as having bad things happen to good people. After all, doesn't justice mean getting what you deserve? Isn't God just?

But the Gospel is not a modification or watering-down or escape-clause of the law. It is another word entirely, which communicates (as no laws ever can) that the true, underlying and overriding, fundamental and eternal purpose of the God who made heaven and earth, is that there should be peace. That all should be well. Which, in circumstances where there is a heritage of evil, can never be accomplished by justice, but only by mercy. This is a fresh thing, a bolt from the blue—or a dove from above.

Until we put down our righteousness and see ourselves as sinners; unless and until we identify

humbly with the people who missed the boat in Noah's day; if we can't see ourselves as Ninevites and Samaritans; we will "misunderestimate" mercy. And we will miss our own boat, our own ark, which is the body of Christ our Lord. We will miss the call of the dove. We will be reluctant doves.

I have misrepresented the hesitance or reluctance of the dove for rhetorical effect only, to highlight how unbelievable is the mercy of God which surpasses and supersedes human plans for ourselves and for our cities, nations, and indeed the world. God's last word to Jonah (the dove) is a lesson for us as well—that God loves the unlovely. That is why God loves us!

If we are angry about the evil of others, we become like the people who hoped Jesus would fulfill John the Baptist's prophecy and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. But (James 1:19-20) "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." Jesus brought unquenchable fire, all right, but it was not a fire of judgment. It is not that fire which burns the candles of this altar but the fire which burns within the warm heart of a God who is love. Let us not hesitate to love, but to judge.

Peace be upon us, and upon the world, in the name of the dove, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.