

At the 10:30 service on March 14, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-9 and Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.

“Second Chances”

There’s a story from the Middle Ages about a young woman who was expelled from heaven. As she left, she was told that if she would bring back the gift that is most valued by God, she would be welcomed back.

She brought back drops of blood from a dying patriot. She brought back some coins that a destitute widow had given to the poor. She brought back a remnant of a Bible that had been used for years by an eminent preacher. She brought back some dust from the shoes of a missionary laboring in a remote wasteland. She brought back many similar things but was turned back repeatedly.

One day she saw a small boy playing by a fountain. A man rode up on horseback and dismounted to take a drink. The man saw the child and suddenly remembered his boyhood innocence. Then, looking in the fountain and seeing the reflection of his hardened face, he realized what he had done with his life. And tears of repentance welled up in his eyes and began to trickle down his cheeks.

The young woman took one of these tears back to heaven and was received with joy and love.

We have two other stories before us today with similar themes. The first is an Avatar-type story, part real part fantasy. It’s the story of Jonah and the second the story is the parable of the lost son – more known as the parable of the prodigal son. Our Bible Study group has read the Jonah story twice – once last week and once today. In these readings I saw how similar the Jonah story was to the lost son story.

Jonah is asked by God to go to the city of Nineveh in Assyria (current day Iraq) as God’s spokesperson to call them on their violence. It’s not a good idea to go to violent people and tell them that God sent you to point out how inappropriate and silly it is to be violent and to suggest in no uncertain terms that they quit. Jonah is no dummy. God says go this way and he buys a ticket for ship that goes as far as possible in the opposite direction! In effect he is running away from God. What kind of prophet is he?

On account of his fleeing God a great storm arises and huge waves threaten ship and crew. It’s discovered that this is happening on account of Jonah so in order to save the ship Jonah suggests that they fling him overboard. They do so and the storm abates. Meanwhile, Jonah is swallowed by a big fish.

He spends the next three days in the belly of the fish and in the process finds himself and renews his relationship to God, indicated by a prayer of thanksgiving. After the prayer the fish coughs him onto dry land and God calls him a second time to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah goes.

The second biblical story – and our third story – is the gospel reading for today. A young man makes the audacious request of his father to give him his share of the inheritance. Probably thinking that his son wants capital to build a life he trustingly hands over his property.

The son takes off and in short order blows the lot on reckless and loose living. Life was great when he had the cash but when his pockets are empty his so-called friends desert him. He lands in the pit without a penny and seeks work.

The only job available is feeding the pigs, so low-paying that he starves. The pig's food looks great. In this pit of despair he comes to his senses and decides to go home and seek his father's forgiveness and offer to work among his hired servants who had a much better life. We know the rest of the story: The father welcomes him home exclaiming: He was dead and now is alive; he was lost and now is found.

It's not difficult to discern the common thread in all these stories. Each person separated themselves from God's intentions for their lives. They saw themselves as wasted and hardened (the man at the fountain); fearful and fleeing (Jonah), and dissipated and lost (the prodigal son). They saw their part in their un-doing, came to themselves and did a 180 and returned to the cutting edge of a genuine relationship with God.

In Christian parlance we call this repentance which is one of the themes of Lent. In this season we face into anything that keeps us from a more vital relationship with God. The beauty of the stories is that they touch our stories and awaken in us areas that need attention.

- I can't see any of us flipping out like the prodigal son.
- There may be shades of hearing God's call like Jonah and then going in the opposite direction.
- There might even be a bunch of things we are doing to earn God's favor like the women in our first story but God really wants a consciousness of repentance. While the story points to the man's repentance God wanted the woman to find her true place in heaven. Perhaps it was she who lost her innocence and was thus thrust out of heaven. More likely she felt entitled about her place in God's home. God wanted a genuine change of heart and perhaps a humble appreciation of the tremendous privilege of being in God's abode.

This speaks to the other equally important aspect of repentance: What happens after we repent?

With the strength of a thankful and renewed relationship with God Jonah courageously does into the lion's jaw and speaks truth to power. It's absolutely amazing that the people and king turn from their ways and repent of their violence. We need Jonahs in our woeful world of conflict.

The lost son returns to his home ready to work for his Dad but his Dad receives him with open arms and plans a party to celebrate the return much to the dislike of the other son, the prodigal's brother. My fantasy of the story is that the brothers are reconciled and the repentant brother makes appropriate amends. This time he is not looking for handouts. His repentance would take time to prove itself as Henry Ward Beecher writes: "Repentance may begin instantly, but reformation often requires a sphere of years."

All the stories point to the mercy, love and grace of God who gives us a second chance. We can forgive ourselves and a family or friend can forgive us and it is good when this happens but the deepest and most abiding form of forgiveness is when God forgives us. We are set free to regain our innocence and gratitude, to reclaim a difficult journey with renewed strength and courage and to embrace a new life of grace, reconciliation and reformation.

With the God of second chances we return to a self that also forgives and loves again, loves deeply again.

I was talking with Helen Morita in the hospital this week about the biblical texts today and the sermon title – and you can imagine this juxtaposition of her second chance – and Helen said: "God is a God of many chances." Yes indeed. We know this to be true but at this juncture in Lent and in the context of today's stories God would be happy if we searched for or realized one thing that is holding us back from a more vital spirituality.

God is dying to give us a second chance. Amen.