

Which cry for God's kindness are we being nudged to notice?

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Epiphany + 3b – Jonah 3 1-10, Ps 62 5-12, 1 Cor 7 29-31, Mk 1 14-20

In a little while, the younger people among us will be heading off for a new year at school or kindy. When you start something new – a new school year, a new job, or if you move to live in a new place – you often feel you're not ready yet. You need more time, more training; somebody should prepare you for it. Maybe you just don't want things to change. I feel like that when I've just arrived on the beach – that moment of decision; should I go in now or wait 'til I've warmed up a bit? How cold *is* that water? But what if somebody suddenly yells out that they're in trouble; that they need our help!' What do we do then? To heck with the cold; in we go!

Today's OT and Gospel stories both start on the beach. For Simon, Andrew, James and John, it's the umpteenth time they've been there. They make their living out of fishing. For Jonah, it may only be his second beach experience. The first was just after God asked him to go to Nineveh. He dashed down to Joppa *(which we call Jaffa)* and took a ship to Tarshish *(Sardinia)*; as far from Nineveh as he could possibly get. Jonah's second beach experience – when the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed him out – was far to the north of Jaffa, so not too far to travel to Nineveh when God called him the second time. For all of those beach people, the Galileans and Jonah, today's experience on the beach was a call to do something they probably felt completely unprepared for. But just like a call to rescue someone who looks like they're in trouble, the calls

they heard weren't something they could ignore.

What's God's call *about*? Why would God call Jonah to go to Nineveh, and why would Jonah particularly want to avoid going to that great city? The second part of the question is easy. Nineveh was a great military power, and famous for its ruthless and terrible treatment of their enemies. If you were told to go and preach repentance to a people like that, what would you do? Suddenly Jonah's response doesn't look that silly. But it still doesn't explain why God wanted him to go there. It concerned God that Nineveh was a violent, brutal place. God wanted it to change.

So Nineveh was God's mission, and God gave that mission as a gift to Jonah. By doing that, God gave Jonah the meaning of his own life – the rescuer of all the people and animals of Nineveh. But Jonah flees from this gift. It doesn't say Jonah flees from Nineveh; it says he flees from the presence of the Lord.^{1,3} On board the ship to Tarshish Jonah's sleeping down below. God sends a mighty storm against the ship. It's not alright by God that somebody sleeps away their life's vocation.

What the book of Jonah gives us is a parable about our vocation to help people to discover God's grace. Jonah, like all of us, is called to join in God's mission. If we can see people cut off from God's love and compassion, we feel called to do something about it. It's obvious, but it's something we're not comfortable with – our calling as God's people is to draw others into relationship with the true God. But we don't jump at it. We stand on the beach. The water looks cold. Out there, flailing in the drink, people are in trouble, and someone nudges us – calls us.

Aunty Betty's story.

It's good to read Jonah 3; to see those people of Nineveh actually listen to the prophet and respond. They responded to

God's call and turned from their former lifestyle. And in that turning, they rediscovered their full humanity – and many animals were saved too, says God. I like that particularly in our warming world .

I think we have two jobs to do as a community. The first is to come to terms with the idea that God is most likely to be nudging us – calling us – towards someone. It's happened before. But who is it this time? Which cry for God's kindness are we being nudged to notice? We can discern this as a community through prayer and discussion. ... The second thing we have to do is to respond – follow that cry; heed that nudge – don't run from God; remember Jonah. The gifts we bear are not the beads and trinkets of self-interest, but the very love of God. And in bearing the specific gift God has given us – bearing this gift to the ones God intends it for, we discover God's other unique gift to us; our true selves. Amen.