

“Where In the World Is God?”  
Jonah 3:1-4:2; Romans 1:11-21;  
John 12:19-32

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Lent is not my favorite time, partly because it's a time where I'm always reminded of my struggles and of the difficulties of working into the life I want to lead in following Christ. Last week we talked about vulnerability and availability and how that can be an entry into community, and yet that's not an easy thing to do. We need to trust in Christ.

There's a certain amount of vulnerability and availability we have when we enter into any kind of relationship or any group. So in some ways, my going to a place called Findhorn is a little like going out into the world and being available and vulnerable in a place that seems a little different. Some questions arise in my mind as to exactly why I'm even going there. Yet, it feels to me like it's important to spend a moment in a place that's not quite as clearly comfortable for me. It doesn't clearly come with that sense of support for who I am, but might ask me some questions and make me wonder.

In today's scripture, Paul is talking about his travels, going out and bringing good news to the whole of the known world at that time. He says this really interesting thing: “I am indebted to the Greeks and the barbarians.” Why in the world is he indebted to them? He's bringing good news to them. It seems like a one-sided thing. Why is he indebted to them?

I have to think about that. Why *is* he indebted to them? What is he learning when he's there? One of the things that happens to us when we go to another place, especially if we're going to talk about the good news, is that there's a reaction to it, especially if we don't live it quite as clearly as we say it. Part of what I'm wondering is if Paul doesn't recognize in his presenting the good news to others that they reflect back to him whether he's really bringing good news, not only in what he says but in who he is. I think that sometimes going out or being with others ends up being a reflection back on ourselves.

I know for me that there are times when I think life is going pretty well and I'm doing pretty well. I'm expressing the faith that I hold. And then I enter into a relationship with other people and I realize there might be a few gaps here and there. One of the things I've learned is that I grew up in a pretty reserved family. You might say that my mother's English roots are really present in our family. There's a certain reserved nature to who we are. I've come to realize that sometimes being reserved doesn't reflect well on being caring. People don't understand that you are caring when you are reserved. That's something I've learned and I've begun to try to change. If you go to a different culture, you find out something about your own. Having two CAYA kids (high school students from Central America) with us this last week—they wanted to give me a hug before they went to bed. That's a great thing; it's just not the way I grew up.

I'm also the youngest in my family and there are certain things about being the youngest that have affected the way I see myself, and the way I see myself reflects on how I act. I grew up thinking that what I had to say wasn't really that valuable, because I was the

young one. I was always the little one. I was the one who always felt like I wasn't listened to, so I assumed what I had to say didn't matter. It's kind of ironic now that God has me in this position where I get up here every Sunday and preach. You get the idea.

What I find out is that when I go into a new place, when I encounter the other, sometimes what I learn is through the reflection back on myself. I wonder if that's what Paul meant when he said he had a debt to the barbarians and the Greeks, because in encountering them, they reflected back on who he was and how he reflected the good news or not. So part of this is reflecting on the other, and how it influences us.

The other thing is this. I titled my sermon "Where in the World is God?" because of the story of Jonah. When Jonah looked around, he didn't want God to be anywhere else but with his people. When God came to Jonah and said, "There are some people in this great big city who are on the path to destruction and I want you to change that," Jonah said no and ran the other way. Because God cared about those people, we know that God is out there as well. Where in the world is God? I think God is everywhere. God sees what's going on. God knew what was going on in Nineveh. He wasn't just concerned with what was going on with the Israelites. Jonah wasn't too happy about it, but that's God's reality, not Jonah's. Sometimes I think it would be really great if God just did what I wanted, too, but I don't think that's the way it is.

God chose Jonah. I really never thought about this before, but why did God choose Jonah—somebody who really didn't want to go? Have you thought about that? Perhaps it was that Jonah already knew something of Nineveh. After all, he had to go talk there; he must have known the language. The Ninevites probably wouldn't have known Hebrew or whatever language Jonah normally spoke. So in some way, Jonah must have already encountered and known the other. It didn't leave a good taste in his mouth, necessarily. Why did God call Jonah and what did Jonah have to know to do this? He had to know something about that other. He had to know what they needed. He had to speak their language. So God called Jonah in spite of his reluctance, in spite of his running away. In the end when Jonah preached throughout the streets of Nineveh, he changed the direction that great city was going. They were on the path to destruction, and he changed their path. I guess we should think about that sometimes when we think about the world going to places of destruction, that maybe one person can make a huge difference.

It's interesting how the story of Jonah ends. God makes a nice plant grow so Jonah could sit under its shade, but then the plant withers and Jonah gets so mad he wants to die because the plant is gone. God says, "Well, then, shouldn't I care about a city of hundreds of thousands when you care about a simple plant?" The end of Jonah is always fascinating to me because God says, "Shouldn't I care for all those people *and their livestock?*" God cares about this world we live in and not just my group, but perhaps the people of Nineveh as well. Jonah must have known something about that group for God to send him to them. We are invited to know the other.

The final thing I want to note is that Jesus recognized when the Greeks came that something was happening. Jesus' reputation was beginning to go across the lines. This wasn't just another group of Judeans. This wasn't just another group of Galileans

coming to him. These were folks from somewhere else. They were beginning to hear about him. His reputation was becoming so large that these people were coming. So if we think about what kind of reflection that was on Jesus' life, it means that he was doing something that was getting attention and he recognized in that moment that things were really going to happen. He was going to be planted so that things could bloom. He suggests that his giving of himself is what will enable that to happen.

What it makes me reflect on is how we are as a body of Christ. What's our reputation? That's one of the things I want to hear when I go to Findhorn. What is the reputation of Christians? What's our reputation today? What kind of reflection is the world giving us?

Shortly after Constantine's death, in the early days of the Christian empire, a guy named Julian came into power. He was called Julian the Apostate because he had gone back to the pagan ways and was trying to overcome this new Christian religion that was out there. He called them the atheists. His frustration was that he couldn't seem to get rid of them. One of the things he said out of frustration was, "They not only take care of their own, they take care of *our* poor!" You see, the body of Christ had a reputation, a reflection that he saw and that he could speak about.

So as we go through Lent, we are asking questions of ourselves, like what kind of reflection do we show? What kind of reflection do we show as individuals or as a body? When Jesus says we sometimes have to lose our life to be able to spread the news, it makes me think about how we as a church get pretty comfortable together and it's great to be a community. But Jesus doesn't ask us to just be a community. He asks us to be the body of Christ that gains a reputation that shows forth the love and grace of God. He doesn't ask us just to focus inward, but to care for all God's people. His reputation is one that draws people in.

He invites us to be his people, to reflect on the needs of the world and how we address them, to show the love and grace of God, to gain that reputation. So it's helpful to look and see what we are reflecting. Who are we? Thank God that we can come and that we can hear God's word to us when it's one of comfort or when it's one of challenge. We are invited to know that he will lead us and that we can become a community that shows God's grace.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, when we look at who you are, we see how you have come to us and the challenge you put into our life by showing us your love for us. It's a love that should overflow. You challenge us to be a body of Christ that shows forth the same grace you give us, brings the healing that you have brought forth among us, and shares the hope you have given us. Lord, lead us into the world in a way that helps us see the needs and respond with your grace and love. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.