

Epiphany III Homily 2012
"First-Class Treatment"
Sunday, January 22, 2012
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Jonah 3:1-5,10

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." Through the call of Jonah and of the first disciples in the Gospel, our lessons for today present the themes of repentance, the coming reign of God, and the mission for us to bear witness to God's word.

Jonah was decidedly reluctant to hear God's call, he also tried to be as ineffectual as possible in doing God's will when God finally corralled him. You will re-call that when he was initially called by God to go to the Assyrian city of Ninevah to cry out against their wickedness, Jonah attempted to escape from God by boarding a ship going in the opposite direction. Caught in a huge storm at sea he was thrown overboard, swallowed by a great fish and finally spewed out three days later on the shore.

God then came to Jonah a second time, commanding him to proclaim to Ninevah the message that the Lord would tell him. This time Jonah acquiesced having come to the realization like all of us who have heard God's call, that you can run but you cannot hide. Jonah enters Ninevah – a city so large that it took three days to walk across it – and he delivered the word of the Lord: Forty days more and Ninevah would be overthrown! To Jonah's utter surprise – and I would observe dismay – the people of Ninevah believe God and they repent of their evil ways! When God saw that they that they had "turned from their evil ways" God decides not to destroy the city and its inhabitants.

At that time Assyria was a feared and despised enemy of Israel. But in the story the residents of Ninevah become model followers of Israel's God, even though Judaism was not their faith. They listen to God's word and repent of their sins as they accept the God of Israel's judgment and reform their behavior.

Jonah is infuriated by this. There is nothing worse for a lot of people than wanting God to smite those they hate and then having God forgive those enemies when they amend their errant ways.

Jonah confronts God: Oh, I just knew it, he says to God. I knew that you would forgive those nasty Ninivites because you are a gracious, merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and always ready to relent from punishing. What kind of God is that, anyway? Have you noticed there are plenty of people who like these qualities of God when they are the recipients of them, but don't necessarily want God to be like that toward their enemies? Like Jonah that is how we want God to be toward us, gracious, compassionate, full of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's not always the way we want God to be toward others.

I ran across this story in a scripture commentary newsletter I receive.

There was this flight leaving from London's Heathrow Airport. A woman with a thick European accent got on the plane. She came down the aisle into the coach section and discovered her seat assignment put her right next to a man with, let's just say, an African accent. She looked at her boarding pass seat assignment and saw that it was correct. She asked the man seated next to her, "I'm sorry, are you in the right seat?" he smiled at her and nodded yes. She looked around the cabin to see if there were any empty seats available but there were none. So, she hailed a flight attendant. "Excuse me," she said, "as you can see I am sitting next to a person whose skin color is different from mine." "Yes, ma'am, I can see that," said the attendant.

"Well," she said, "this is simply unacceptable. Is there another available seat?" The flight attendant looked at her strangely and said, "I'm sorry ma'am, it's against our policy to move people unnecessarily."

"You don't understand," said the woman, this arrangement will just not do. I have funds in my purse to arrange an alternate seat." The flight attendant replied, "You do?" "Yes, I do. Would you please go up to first class and see if there is an available seat? I simple cannot sit next to this person."

The attendant shrugged her shoulders and walked up to first class. A few minutes later she returned. She tapped the African man on the arm and said to him, "I'm sorry sir, I hate to do this but I must make a seat change. If you would follow me, we have a place for you in first class."

God's abundant love toward us makes it possible for us to give every person first- class treatment. Sometimes we just get stuck in the same old seats.

Amen.