

Epiphany 3B
Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

The Rev, Dr .F. Darcy Williams @ Emmanuel Chestertown
Psalm 62: 6-14 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31

24 January 2021
Mark 1: 14-20

Life presents us with a multitude of decisions and opportunities. Some are simple. Some we agonize over for days. Some decisions we make are insignificant. Some have effects that are incredibly far-reaching.

Today's lessons also tell stories about how decisions that produce life-altering results. In the Old Testament reading, Jonah finally does as God asked him to do, and the Ninevites heard his words and changed their ways. God saw their change of heart, had mercy and saved them from destruction. Eventually even Jonah recognized the power of God's love and mercy.

In Mark's gospel, we witness Andrew, Peter, James and John called by Jesus to a new life, leaving all they knew to follow him. They could not predict what would happen next. Yet, in that one decision they became part of something far bigger than themselves, something that would change their own lives and change the world.

Little did they realize that in following their heart, they would be part of spreading the good news of God's kingdom to all who would listen. All they knew was that it was the right thing to do. They heard the voice of God and something inside of them changed. They could not explain it. But the choice was clear. They listened with their hearts. They looked into Jesus' eyes and God filled them with grace.

The gospel is not a story about how wonderful Andrew, Peter, James and John were. The OT lesson is not about how wonderful Jonah was. These are stories about hearing God's voice and allowing God to work in and through lives. These are stories about God using ordinary people, and even people who steadfastly refuse to listen for an amazingly long time, to bring the message of healing grace into the world.

We are all confronted with decisions and opportunities everyday. Decisions that may seem small at the time but decisions that may have far-reaching consequences. Opportunities to do good, to be a friend, to spread the good news. Or decisions to hold a grudge, refuse to listen, demonize the other. Every decision we make has some effect, great or small, good or bad. As Christians, followers of Jesus, we've made a commitment to live our lives as Jesus taught us to do, a commitment to be God's hands and feet on earth, a commitment to treat each other with compassion, dignity, and love. But it can be very hard.

In recent times we have experienced turmoil, hurt and loss. We have heard hate-filled or self-serving rhetoric that attempted to sow the seeds division and then nurture them. The devastating effects of the COVID pandemic have laid bare many of the inequities in our society, inequities in education, health care, job opportunities, housing, and social justice. Superimposed on the economic crises caused by the pandemic is the tragic loss of human life – more than 400,000 here in the US alone – loved ones whose lives were cut short by this deadly disease.

As we move into 2021 and the dawn of a new administration in Washington, both our government and our religious leaders have called for a time of healing. But true healing requires

that we face the problems and correct the underlying issues. We cannot just move on and pretend all will be well. There is much work to be done – the work of healing takes time and energy and hard work. President Biden acknowledged as much when he called for unity in the fight against the common “foes we face: anger, resentment, hatred, extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness and hopelessness.”

But as the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay recently wrote: *Real healing means treating the wounds, binding up brokenness, and eradicating the infection. Real healing takes time and energy . . . For healing to take place, what—and who—has been broken, must be made whole. . .*ⁱ

For us, that means yes, there must be accountability and truth, but there must also be prayer, grace, and a willingness to heal. Resentment often flows freely, it is grace and the willingness to do the hard work of repair that is far more difficult. It is easy to point the finger and blame others, it is much harder to build the bridges that are required.

Amanda Gorman, the young poet laureate, echoed the call to healing, repair, and bridge-building when she spoke to our hearts in the words of her inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb”ⁱⁱ. In one section she said:

*We are striving to forge a union with purpose
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another*

Her final words:

*The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it*

Our scriptures speak to us of God’s call – the call to each of us to be active members of God’s kingdom. It is the same call President Biden made when he said there is much to be repaired, restored, rebuilt, healed, and gained as we unite to face the future together. It is the same call Amanda Gorman championed: to put down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another, to see the light and be brave enough to be the light. God has blessed us with an abundance of gifts and opportunities, and the grace to make a difference. I pray God will continue to speak to us, call to us, holding us in love and giving us the grace and wisdom to use our gifts to bring about a dawn where wounds are truly healed, and all persons are treated with equality, dignity, and respect. Amen

ⁱ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-january-24-2021/>

ⁱⁱ <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/535052-read-transcript-of-amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem>