

REFLECTION 21 JANUARY 2024 EPIPHANY 3**By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai****“STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING”**

A teacher asked her class what they knew about whales. One little girl spoke up and said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The teacher smiled and said she didn't think that was very likely because, even though whales can be big, their throats are not big enough to swallow a man.

But the little girl was adamant and maintained that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The teacher became impatient and reiterated that this was physically unlikely.

But the girl was unmoved, and said that when she got to heaven, she would ask Jonah.

“But what if Jonah went to hell?” the teacher asked.

The girl replied: “Then you ask him.”

Both our readings this morning point to the immediacy of the call. In Jonah's case from God and in the fishermen's case from Jesus.

Our Gospel narrative is of Jesus calling the first disciples, Simon and Andrew and James and John's sons of Zebedee. The verses that have always amazed me as a young person also pursuing a “call” back in the day is verse 18: “At once they left their nets and followed him”. And then in verse 20 “without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

Who does that? I know my father and mother would have been really inconvenienced and annoyed if I was to just stop doing what I was doing and leave them standing bewildered on the foreshore leaving a job unfinished to go a follow some wayward hippy that I have only just laid eyes on. Perhaps, they had heard of Jesus and so did not need anymore convincing or encouragement to go and become fishers of people.

I know for me each time I have been called to take on a new ministry I have needed to find closure with the ministry I was in at the time with the people and places that I have been pastoring to over the years. If I was just to up sticks and leave (and I know some minister's have done this, for instance never coming back from holiday and sending a text resigning from the parish) the Presbytery would send a commission to (a) ascertain what happened and why and (b) make sure that the parish were pastorally cared for.

In the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa in Samoa and globally. Every 5 years ministers take a 3 month holiday paid for by the parish, they often choose to go to friends or family overseas for their break. During that time, the church will consider whether they would like to continue with the ministry of that minister and their family or not. In the event that they choose not to continue, the minister is sent a "dear John" letter or phone call and told that when they return they will be returning to pack up their house and move on. You can imagine how nerve wracking that would be for the minister and his family (there is no "her" as Samoa do not ordain women).

The Uniting Churches of Aotearoa NZ UCANZ which I co-chair also operate on a 5 year review after which the minister is invited to continue for another 5 years or thanked and discharged. Some ministers are not renewed because of theological differences or that the minister is not pastoral enough, or they are

just plain lazy. There are a few colleagues here who know what I'm talking about. But the thing is with the PCANZ you are not necessarily called for a particular time or tenure. Our church the PCANZ has something similar in that after every 7 years of ministry the minister should take 3 months study leave and this is discussed with Presbytery first. I have to admit in nearly 33 years of ordained ministry I have never taken study leave, not because I didn't want to but none of my ministries have been able to afford it, it would have been financially difficult for them. So I just ignored it.

Due to the fact that many ministers will soon be retiring for instance us baby boomers, we no longer have a retirement age because there are not enough clergy within the PCANZ to go around.

However, there is indeed a time to "stop what you are doing". In this particular case I know of one minister in his 90's who won't let go. He broke away from the CCCAS and had the church properties put into Trust under his name (his daughters a lawyer) and he owns everything. So now they are an independent church. He is now in a wheelchair, he needs to be assisted at every level, he can't be heard when he preaches and preaches whatever he feels like not following any lectionary etc. The congregation pity him for even they know it is time to "stop what you are doing" but do not have the heart to say anything. I also heard of another minister preaching about the Easter story on Christmas day. So, golly gosh there needs to be some discerning and some limitations on when to call it a day, sadly, congregations are often too afraid to dismiss a minister for fear of retribution and punishment. In the Pacific you could say that people of the worldly realm should not interfere with people of the heavenly realm called by God. When you are independent and are accountable to no-one but yourself you can stay in the pulpit until you die

regardless of whether you are doing a good job or not. In these cases yes indeed you should “stop what you are doing” even if it takes a parish council to let you down gently.

I have just finished my 3 year review under the PCANZ Ministry Development Plan, this used to be so you could get your Certificate of Good Standing but this year it is no longer linked to that, it is a review for the sake of one’s ministry development for the next 3 years. The certificate of good standing will now be something quite separate.

Lets now take a look at the tale of Jonah. He was in some ways told to “stop what he was doing and carry out a task from God to the people of Ninevah. Mainstream Bible scholars generally regard the Book of Jonah as fictional, and often at least partially satirical. Jonah is portrayed as a wayward prophet who flees from God’s summons to prophesy against the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. According to the opening verse, Jonah is the son of Amittai. This lineage identifies him with the Jonah mentioned in II Kings 14:25 who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 785 BCE. It is possible that some of the traditional materials taken over by the book were associated with Jonah at an early date, but the book in its present form reflects a much later composition. It was written after the Babylonian Exile (6th century BCE), probably in the 5th or 4th century and certainly no later than the 3rd, since Jonah is listed among the Minor Prophets in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, composed about 190.

The main protagonist in this story is Jonah he was an unlikely prophet who simply wants to go about his life free from duty and responsibility. Then God calls and gives him a relatively simple task: Go to the city of Nineveh and warn the people they will be destroyed in three days because of their wicked

behaviour. But Jonah can't face up to the job. Instead, he makes his way to the local port, boards a ship, and runs away by boat.

As the story goes, the boat is tossed around in a violent storm and Jonah is thrown overboard after he admits that he is the cause of the tempest. He is then swallowed by a fish and lives inside its belly for three days. Jonah cries out to God and is spit out of the fish so he can make his way to Nineveh to fulfil his assignment.

Jonah then warns the people of Nineveh that God plans to destroy them unless they repent. While we might expect them to laugh in Jonah's face, instead they take him seriously. The king of Nineveh descends his throne and declares a three day fast, decreeing that no human or beast will taste food or drink water. God observes the Ninevites' acts of contrition and spares the city.

In modern fictional jargon, the possible destruction of Nineveh is nothing more than a plot device necessary to the story but which is in fact irrelevant itself. The true lesson of the book revolves around Jonah himself. Jonah is irresponsible and immature, the polar opposite of every other character in the book. The shipmates that Jonah encounters while he attempts to flee all act with compassion and reverence, resisting the impulse to throw Jonah overboard simply to save themselves. It's only after Jonah insists that they reluctantly do so. When the sea then becomes calm, they respect the power of God by taking vows and offering sacrifices.

Later, the people of Nineveh defy all expectations and respond in a similar fashion. Every single character in this story—even the whale which follows God's instructions to swallow and then spit Jonah out—is presented in a positive light. Except, that is, for Jonah himself.

Even after God spares the city of Nineveh, Jonah remains unchanged. The text tells us that after delivering God's dire warning, Jonah climbed a hill outside the city to see what would happen. We infer that he was actually disappointed that there was no fire and brimstone. He moans to God; I knew that this was a total waste of my time. You weren't really going to go through with it.

God then delivers the real moral punchline of the story with a small demonstration by first providing and then taking away a shady plant which gives Jonah shelter from the blazing sun. Predictably, Jonah only thinks of his own needs and begs God for death because he is in such discomfort.

Perhaps one of the purposes of this tale is that we re-evaluate our choices and pledge to strengthen our connection to others. The real message of Jonah isn't that we can convince God we're good people by fasting and praying. Rather, it's our acceptance of responsibility and caring for others that will improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

Sometimes in our lives when we experience a call from the divine or that holy mystery we call God it is immediate. After much avoiding and running away from the call like Jonah and looking for other things to distract us, when we eventually can no longer ignore that call, it just happens it all falls into place. Like I said last week, no matter how young or old we are, the call in this case to "stop what we are doing" and respond is still a possibility for our lives. Amen.