

# The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jonah 3:1-5, 10
<i>Response</i>	Teach me your ways, O Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 7:29-31
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:14-20

The Third Sunday for Ordinary Time in Year B presents us with a curious passage, especially in light of last week's reading. It's the story of the call of the disciples, and in particular the call of Simon and Andrew and James and John from Mark 1:16-20. The reason I say this is a curious passage is because at first glance you might think, well wait, I thought we just did that when we looked at John 1 and the story of the encounter of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew with Jesus, alongside this anonymous disciple and the whole story of Jesus naming Peter Cephas. So at first glance those might seem like they're the same story, but they're actually not, they're separated chronologically, and that chronological difference is important. So let's look at this gospel text carefully. We'll talk about how it's different from the reading from the Gospel of John, and then why it's significant, and why the Church is giving it to us for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. This is how the gospel reading begins:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little

farther, he saw James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zeb'edee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, a couple of questions here we want to ask. Number one, is this the same call of Simon and Andrew that we saw in John's Gospel or a different call? And if so, how do we know it's different? Number two, what does Jesus mean when he says “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand”? Obviously that's the center of his message; what would it have meant in a first century Jewish setting? What would the early apostles Peter and Andrew and James and John, what would they have understood him to mean when he says this? And then number three, and this has always puzzled me as I read this over the years, why do they just drop everything and follow him? I mean, is that a really believable occurrence? How could they have responded so quickly to his call, as Mark says, “and immediately they left their nets and followed him”? What's that, what's going on there? What would it mean? What did it mean? And then why, fourth and finally, does Jesus say, “I will make you fishers of men”? What does that mean to make them “fishers of men”? So let's walk through each one of those together.

The first and third question are kind of related to one another. Notice the opening line there, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee.” Okay so pause here. We're in the very opening verses of Mark's gospel, but Mark assumes that you know the story, not just of the ministry of John the Baptist, but also of his arrest by King Herod, and then, he probably assumes you also know of his eventual martyrdom under King Herod, under whom John was beheaded for criticizing King Herod about his adulterous remarriage situation that he was in. So Mark here is assuming that, and so that's our first clue that this is an entirely different encounter between Simon and Andrew; or it shows that between Peter and Andrew and James and John with Jesus. The encounter we read about in John 1 took place while John the Baptist was still alive and while he was still ministering in the Jordan River because John himself is the one who says to the disciples “behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” So he, John

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

himself, points Andrew, and then Andrew brings Simon Peter, to Jesus; so he's the one that points out Jesus. And it's only after his ministry is completed that he is arrested and eventually beheaded. So this is long after John's arrest by Herod and it appears to imply here that what did his disciples do? Well, once he was arrested at least some of them, apparently, disbanded or went back to their homes. So in this case, Peter and Andrew and James and John were Galilean, so they were fishermen from Galilee, who — especially if the beloved disciple in John 1 is in fact John, let's presume that for the sake of argument — if that were the case, then these four brothers would've been fisherman by trade, but devout Jewish men who had been disciples of John himself during his lifetime. Once John though has been arrested, maybe despondent or having lost hope or whatever, maybe just confused, they end up going back to their ordinary lives as fishermen. And it's only then that Jesus of Nazareth comes to Galilee and then finds them fishing and says to them, what? “The time is at hand, the kingdom of God is here”, right, “repent and believe in the good news.”

So what's the good news? What did Jesus mean by “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at hand”? Both of those expressions, as I show in my book *The Case for Jesus*, I can't go through this in a lot of detail now, but there's a whole chapter in that book, *The Case for Jesus*, saying that those two expressions are allusions to the book of Daniel. In Daniel 2, Daniel gives the only explicit prophecy of the future coming of “the kingdom,” that will be established by God himself, in other words, the kingdom of God. And in that prophecy Daniel sets up, basically, a timeline of these four kingdoms: the Babylonian Empire, then the Persian (middle Persian Empire in the Fifth Century), then the Greek empire in the Fourth Century B.C., and then the Roman Empire was going to come and take over in the First Century B.C. And then during that time of the fourth kingdom, the fourth Empire, the Roman Empire, a little stone will come, be cut out and will become a great kingdom that spreads throughout the whole earth, become a great mountain, and that stone is a symbol for the kingdom of God. So when Jesus says “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom is at hand”, he is alluding to the book of Daniel, which was very popular in First Century Jewish circles precisely because unlike the other prophets who just said, you know, “one day God's going to send a Savior, one day God's going to make the world new again, one day he's going to forgive our sins”, Daniel actually gives a timeline, Daniel gives a sequence. He gives a chronology to the coming of the kingdom of God and to the coming of the Son of Man, who

was a messianic figure, and he shows that during the time of the fourth Empire after Babylon, which any First Century Jew would've known was Rome, many of them in fact interpreted it as Rome, that at that time the God of heaven would set up a kingdom on earth that would spread throughout the whole world like a stone turning into a great mountain, but that this kingdom would never ever be destroyed. Unlike David's kingdom or Babylon's Kingdom, or middle Persian, or the Romans, or the Greeks, all those other kingdoms were destroyed, but this final kingdom would not be destroyed. So in a sense, what Jesus is saying is the time of fulfillment, the time of the prophecies has come, turn away from your sin and accept the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Alright, now in that situation, he's preaching that in Galilee, but in this case he encounters four men, two of whom we know for certain have already met him, right, Simon and Andrew. And in this case he may already have met John, the son of Zebedee, as well, if that anonymous disciple from John's Gospel is in fact the beloved disciple St. John. So what's going on here? I think this is so important, so critical, is that John's Gospel is giving you the back story to the Synoptics. In other words, one of the reasons this seems so, in a sense, almost unbelievable that Jesus would just call the apostles and they would drop their nets, is because Mark's very concise narrative can give you the impression that this is the first time Jesus has ever met Peter; this the first time Jesus has ever met Andrew. This is the first time he's ever met James and John, but John's Gospel, as is always the case, supplements the information that we know from the Synoptics and he tells us, and has told us last Sunday, that this wasn't the first occasion, this wasn't the first time they had met. Jesus has actually been identified by John the Baptist, their previous teacher, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and Andrew believed he was the Messiah. Now what happened after that and how they left Jesus, or whether Jesus left them, we don't know the details of that, but what we know is some time has past and now, in a sense, Jesus has gone up to Galilee to encounter them and to invite them, now in the wake of John's arrest, to become his disciples, right, to give up their ordinary vocation of fishing for fish, to become fishers of men.

So what does that mean? What would it have meant to become fishers of men in the first century A.D.? Well on the one hand, you can see this just as a simple metaphor, right. Obviously, what do fisherman do? They catch fish. So he's going

to make them fishers of men, he's going to call them to come with him and to invite, or to catch, other men to become disciples, to gather a group of followers around him who will believe in the good news of the kingdom and call other people to repent. That's kind of an obvious meaning. However, "fisher of men" is a weird expression. It's an unusual image, and whenever you see strange imagery or unusual expressions in the New Testament, a lot of times they are allusions to the Old Testament, they are allusions to ancient Jewish Scriptures. And in this case Jesus is alluding to a prophecy from the book of Jeremiah that isn't in our readings for the day, it's not in the lectionary; but I still think it's important for you to focus on to understand the meaning of the call. So if you go back to Jeremiah 16, it's in verses 14-16. There, the prophet Jeremiah, who lives in the Sixth Century before Christ, so this is 500 years or so before Jesus, on the cusp of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, Jeremiah the prophet said that one day people were going to forget about the exodus from Egypt. They weren't going to talk about that anymore, you know, the exodus under Moses where God set his people free and brought them to the promise land. In the future, Jeremiah said, people are going to talk about a new Exodus, in which God will not just save his people from Egypt, but he will gather his scattered children from throughout the Gentiles, from throughout the nations, where they had been scattered by the Assyrian exile in 722 BC. Then he would bring them back, right, and in that prophecy Jeremiah uses the imagery of fishing for human beings. So let me give you those words, Jeremiah 16:14 says this:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' For I will bring them back to their own land which I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, says the LORD, and they shall catch them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.

All right, cool imagery there. So what's Jeremiah doing? He's saying that there's going to be a future exodus, but in this exodus God is going to gather his people to himself from all the countries throughout the whole world. And when he does that

though, he's going to have to send out men, specific people, to act as fishers, so that they can catch them. This is the prophecy of the new exodus; it was one of the central Jewish hopes of Jesus' day, that one day when God would save his people in the future, he would do it similar to how he had done it at the time of the exodus from Egypt, but in a more universal way, not just from one country, from all the countries of the earth. So it's in that context that Jesus comes to Simon and Andrew and James and John and says to them, follow me, and they dropped their nets and they start to follow him, and he says I will make you fishers of men. So what's he saying to them? He's basically telling them I'm calling you to, basically, be the prophets of the new exodus. I'm calling you to be the fishers of the new exodus, who will go not just into one country, but into all the countries of the Earth to bring men back to God and to gather again, watch this, the lost tribes of Israel who Assyria had scattered. So those lost tribes, you might recall from previous videos, 10 of the 12 tribes were scattered among the nations and the prophet said one day all 12 tribes are going to be gathered together again. And the Jews at the time said, well how's that going to happen when we don't even know where they are, they are mixed in with all the Gentiles. Well Jesus here steps into that situation and begins to call the first four of the 12 apostles, right, calling them to be fishers of men because they are, in a sense, going to constitute around him a new Israel. They're the beginning of a new Israel that's going to inaugurate a new exodus, and that's going to bring people back to God through repentance from sin and through preparation for the coming of his kingdom.

And you can imagine, put yourself in Peter or Andrew or James or John's place. If you had believed in John the Baptist, if you had hopes that he was, you know, the great prophet who is going to inaugurate the new exodus, right. Think about it, where did John do his public ministry? He did in the river Jordan. What was the river Jordan? That was where the first exodus had ended, right? In the book of Joshua 5, when they finally got through the 40 years of traveling in the desert, they came to the river Jordan and then they miraculously crossed through the Jordan River and they make it to the Promised Land. So John the Baptist was also a prophet of the new exodus. He went to the place where the first exodus had ended and he started in motion a new exodus. Then he got arrested and he got beheaded, and it seems as if maybe, you know, things are falling apart, maybe it's not coming to pass now. Jesus, however, comes into that situation and says follow me, I'll make you fishers of men. In other words, I am going to be the great prophet; I'm

going to be the Messiah, the one to bring the new exodus to completion, to inaugurate it and to consummate it, right, through my public ministry. And now it makes sense why Peter and James and Andrew and John would drop their nets and go follow this guy, because they were already ready to receive that message and to become fishers of men

All right, that's the gospel. What about the Old Testament reading? You can see this theme of vocation and prophetic mission by looking at the Old Testament readings for the day. The first one is from the book of Jonah, one of my favorite prophets in the Old Testament. It's about Jonah's mission to the Gentiles, guess where? In Nin'evah, the capital city of Assyria, which is where kind of the heart of the Empire that led to the scattering of the 10 northern tribes. So there's a link here. Jonah is a prophet to the Gentiles, just like the apostles will eventually be sent amongst the Gentile nations. In Jonah 3:1-5 we read this — this is after Jonah comes out of the belly of the fish:

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nin'evah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nin'evah, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nin'evah was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nin'evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

And then it skips down to verse 10 and said:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.

Alright, I'll pause there. I know you're probably thinking, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second, how can God do evil, right, if He's all good? And even more, how can he repent of the evil which he was planning to do? In other words, how can he change his mind when he's God? Well just hold that thought for a second, I'll address that at the end of the presentation. For now I want you to just see the main

thematic connection between the Old and the New Testament. The reason the Church is giving us this is because it's the story of Jonah's mission as a prophet, it's a mission of repentance. He's calling these Gentiles to repent of their sin, to turn away from their sin, and you can see that through the penances that they engage in. They are fasting, abstaining from food, but also wearing sackcloth, an uncomfortable, very uncomfortable, kind of clothing, in order to make reparation for their sins, as a way of expressing outwardly their repentance, turning away from sin and turning to God. So the reason the Church put this as the first reading is because it's kind of an Old Testament anticipation of the mission of the apostles. Jesus comes on the scene proclaiming repentance, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, just like Jonah came onto the scene proclaiming repentance to the wicked city of Nin'evah, to these Gentiles who really didn't know God and not only did they not know God, they were persecutors of the ancient Israelite people. So Jonah's openness to God's call, his openness to the mission, is really the heart of this passage.

Now if you look then to the Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 25, you can see this thematic connection. In verses four and five we read these words in the psalm:

Make me to know thy ways, O LORD;  
teach me thy paths.  
Lead me in thy truth, and teach me,  
for thou art the God of my salvation;  
for thee I wait all the day long.

So in this case the Church has just chosen the Psalm that reflects that spirit of submission, that spirit of openness to whatever God's vocation is for us, whatever God's call is for each of us individually, to whatever God's mission is for us. That's the main theme of the Psalm; teach me your ways, O Lord.

Okay, so that's an explanation of the interconnected readings for this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. I'd like to close by looking at two insights from the living tradition that can help us understand these texts better. The first one is from St. Thomas Aquinas and it is about the verse in Jonah that is really troubling for a lot of people. Why does the Bible, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, why does it say that God repented of the evil that he had planned to do to the Nin'evites? I



thought God couldn't do evil and I also thought he couldn't change his mind because he's God. He's eternal. He's outside of time. He's not subject to change. So what would we say about that? In this case I always try to tell students when you encounter a difficult text like that in the Bible, it's really important to not simply try to figure it out for yourself, although that's important, it's also important to ask "well wait, what do the great minds in the history of the Church have to say about this passage"? What explanations have they offered? Look at the early Church Fathers, the doctors, the Pope, the magisterium, and that kind of thing. And in this instance, one great place to go was always St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas lived in the 13th century. He's a Doctor of the Church; he's called the Common and Universal Doctor, and is also called the Angelic Doctor. His teaching is widely honored and revered by Popes throughout the centuries, and in his famous work the *Summa Theologica*, which means, "the summary of theology", he actually takes up this very issue. So I actually have a copy of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* here, small little book; first two volumes, last three volumes. It's a massive, massive work, and he covers so many questions, so many theological topics, and so many issues, and the one I want to look at today is from volume 1 of the *Summa Theologica*. It's in question 19, the seventh article, and he has an article where he asked the question whether God's will can change? Because that's what the reading from the book of Jonah suggests, right, that God changed his mind and repented of the evil which he had done. And I have a little outline for you there, just to kind of summarize it, but St. Thomas says this:

It seems that the Will of God is changeable. For the Lord says, "I repent that I have made man" (Gen 6:7)...

In other words "I'm sorry that I've made man", right, which makes it sound like he's changing his mind. This is story of the flood, where he sees the wickedness of mankind and he says I'm sorry that I've made man, or I repent that I've made man. And so that can give you the impression that God has changed his mind. But St. Thomas says this:

*On the contrary*, It is said: *God is not as a man, that He should lie, nor as the son of man, that He should be changed* (Num. 23:19) ...

So he's pointing out that, no you have to interpret that verse in light of other scriptures, which make it clear that God does not change. So how are we to understand the statement that he repented? He says this:

These words of the Lord are to be understood metaphorically, and according to the likeness of our nature.

Meaning out human nature.

For when we repent, we destroy what we have made; although we may even do so without change of will; as, when a man wills to make a thing, at the same time intending to destroy it later. Therefore God is said to have repented, by way of comparison with our mode of acting. And so far, as by the flood, He destroyed from the face of the Earth, men whom He had made.<sup>2</sup>

So what Thomas is basically saying there is that the language of God changing, or repenting, is not to be taken literally, it is to be taken metaphorically, or some people will call it anthropomorphically. In other words, we talk about God in human language as if he were a human being, but whenever the Scriptures, or when philosophers or theologians like St. Thomas, are precise about it, they make clear that in his essence God cannot change. However, what does change in the book of Jonah is the effect, right. He tells them if you don't repent, this is what's going to happen. And then when they do repent it doesn't happen. And so metaphorically we can speak of God having changed, or having repented, of what he was going to do with them in response to their repentance. Although, obviously, from God's point of view, from all eternity, he's known about their repentance, but they don't know about their repentance, and Jonah doesn't know necessarily that they're going to actually repent; he's sent on a mission. So it's one of those cases where the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, but they do speak to us in human language, and they speak to us in human idioms about things that are divine, things that God does.

And you might say, well hold on, what about the evil issue, like why does God say, or why does Scripture say, he repented of the evil that he was to do to them? This

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. 19. 7

one's actually even a little easier; it basically is a language issue. In Hebrew the word for evil, *ra'ah*, is also the word for suffering, or misery, or distress. In other words, there is no Hebrew word for "suffering," which is can be something bad that happens to us, whether it's our fault or not, or whether it's morally bad, good or neutral, right. We have a word like that in English, "suffering", where as the word "evil" in English connotes that it's always something that is wrong, like it's morally wrong to do that. Hebrew doesn't have a word like that, it just has the word evil, *ra'ah*, which can mean "things that are morally bad," but it also may just mean misery, or distress, or suffering. Pope John Paul II actually points this out in his apostolic letter on redemptive suffering, on human suffering, *Salvifici Doloris* is the name of it, it's a great letter. And he just points out that in the Old Testament, because there is no word for misery or suffering or distress, sometimes it will say that God himself "does evil", when what it means is that God can cause suffering, God can cause distress through his punishments, as when he punishes human beings for turning away from him. And then that, in this case, that's what's being described here. It's describing the suffering and the misery that is going to come upon the Ninevites if they don't repent, but because they do repent that "evil," that suffering, that misery does not come upon them, God does not inflict a punishment on them. That's what the expression means, "God repented of the evil which he intended to do to them."

So finally, another aspect from the living tradition comes from Origen of Alexandria, he's from around 200 A.D., so he's a lot earlier than St. Thomas Aquinas, but he points out something that I think is really important, which is why does God call fishermen? What's the significant of choosing fishermen to be the apostles, choosing fishermen to give this prophetic mission? Why didn't Jesus go down to the academy of the Rabbis in Jerusalem and pick a few of the best students there to be these prophets of the new exodus? Why would you go up to Galilee and get fishermen to do it? There are a couple of reasons here. First, Origen says this, this is really interesting, he says:

We may see... how that religion itself...

Meaning, the religion of Christianity,

...grew up in a short time... this result is the more surprising, that even the teachers of it themselves neither were men of skill, nor very numerous; and yet these words are preached throughout the whole world, so that Greeks and Barbarians, wise and foolish, adopt the doctrines of the Christian religion. From which it is no doubtful inference, that it is not by human power or might that the words of Jesus Christ come to prevail with all faith and power over the understandings and souls of all men.<sup>3</sup>

That's from Origen, *On First Principles*. So what Origen is saying here is one of the reasons God chooses lowly fishermen to bring the message of the gospel, one of the reasons he chooses so few, just 12 men, is precisely to show us that it's divine and not human. The spread of Christianity isn't something that is brought about by really clever human tactics, it's brought about by the Holy Spirit of God, it's brought about by the inspiration of God, it's brought about by the fulfillment of prophecy. I would also add though, just in closing, as a person from South Louisiana who grew up fishing, that on a natural level, fisherman, professional fisherman like Peter and James and John and Andrew, would have certain natural qualities that would be amenable to proclaiming the gospel as their vocation. You can think here about the fact that to be a fisherman you have to have patience, right, you don't just catch something if you're rushing, you have to wait, you have to learn to wait. You also have to be skilled; you have to practice, right, you don't just stumble into it and be successful. It takes years to develop a knowledge of where the fish are, how to catch them, what places to go, what places not to go, what the weather should be like, what it shouldn't be like. I mean they're all these details that go into fishing. It's actually complex, and it takes time to learn it; it takes patience and it takes skill. I would also say too that, last but not least, a fisherman has to, in a sense, totally rely on God. There's nothing you can do to make the fish bite, right? I mean, the weather conditions have to be right, the natural conditions have to be right, but that's all not in your hands, that's in God's hands. And so a fisherman is particularly inclined to learn how to be patient, and wait, and rely on God. And I think that's really going to be a gift that Peter and Andrew and James and John need to utilize as they begin to spread the gospel. There going to have to realize it's not going to be because of them, or their gifts, or their skills that the gospel spreads throughout the world. It's going to be because of

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<sup>3</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* 4.1.2; trans. ANF

the grace of God, and he's only calling them to answer the vocation, answer the call, embark on the mission, and then persevere, be patient, and that God will make sure that the catch is a good one.