



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

## January 22, 2012, Third Sunday after the Epiphany

By Melinda A. Quivik

Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Psalm 62:5–12

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Mark 1:14–20

### Introduction

On this Third Sunday after the Epiphany, the preacher is confronted with command, reversal, promise, Jesus' enabling call, and life in the subjunctive mood. These prophets call out a new possibility, a "what if" sense. Anyone who introduces a whole new way of thinking is bound to a difficult task. The people of Nineveh can hardly be expected to hear Jonah, let alone heed him. And yet they do. Jesus' announcement—that "the realm of God has come near"—can hardly be expected to be understood among a people who are focused on making their livelihoods. Yet they drop their nets and leave their boats and coworkers to follow. Both Jonah and Jesus cry out, "Repent," to people who, in fact, accept the messages of these prophets.

On this Sunday, named according to the "epiphany" through which Jesus' identity was revealed, Jesus can be readily distinguished from Jonah. Despite their common callings as prophets of the God who makes promises (in these texts, both negative and positive!), Jonah announces God's plan; Jesus announces his own. Therein lies the significance of the Epiphany and the way in which the texts of this time *after* the Epiphany draw out Jesus' import. I draw out the social implications of the Third Sunday after the Epiphany at the end of this commentary.

### 1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Especially in festival time (such as the Sundays after the Epiphany), the Epistle reading carries a strong complementary relationship to the First Testament and Gospel readings. In this case, the relationship is, as with the Ninevites and fishers, a visceral turning to a new life. The Corinthians are told by Paul to live in the subjunctive mood: as if . . . ("those who have wives be as though . . . those who mourn as though . . . those who rejoice as though . . .," vv. 29–30). In other words, whatever the situation, the people of God should undergo a full reversal of their situations. Why? "For the present form of this world is passing away" (v. 31). This Third Sunday after the Epiphany urges us to embrace life in the subjunctive as a call from God. The Epistle's command pulls together all of today's texts. The subjunctive mode would mean living *as if* other people mattered and *as if* we ourselves are beloved of God, instead of condemned for self-absorption or the myriad other faults we so easily pour down upon our own heads. Life in the subjunctive means that even if we don't believe we ourselves are loved or that others are deserving of more \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank with peace, justice, food, security, appreciation, a home, health care, freedom, good government, joy, blessing, community, education, meaningful work, etc.], God is holding out a vision to help us imagine such a world and to shape our lives on the possibilities.



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

One outcome of such a life is that, instead of coming up with reasons meant to explain why we ought to help the poor get jobs, safe homes, or good medical care, we would be unable to envision a world in which doing so would be merely a matter of choice. Care for our neighbors would be simply a matter of course. Living *as if* makes certain assumptions, chief of which is that God's desire for all humanity, and in fact all of creation, is wholeness and health in all manner of things. In an *as if* world, we would not question whether we ought to create a society in which all children can thrive, whatever their family background or neighborhood. Under a subjunctive orientation to life, the foundation of political, economic, and social issues is the unquestionable well-being of all people. Pundits and politicians would no longer sway us with the consequences of leaving anyone outside of the benefits that the powerful accrue. Rather, the orientation of all decision makers, all citizens—fueled by people of faith who hear God's call to life *as if*—would be one of making choices that have at their heart a posture of repentance. We all would live embraced by sackcloth on account of the pain of those in our midst who do not have enough—be they mammals without enough land to roam, trees without enough community within which to thrive, or human beings without enough support for livelihood.

The fishers will collect the people in order that the sackcloth can be handed out. But the gathering will include celebration, for the realm comes near. The present unfair form of this world is always passing away, wherever the people hear, see, turn, and follow—and even when they do not, for the coming of the realm is God's doing.