

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
JANUARY 26, 2003

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 Psalm 25 I Cor 7: 29-31 Mark 1: 14-20

Dear Preachers:

FIRST OF ALL,..... Our community is still getting donations from you for our Advent fund raiser. Thank you so much. You have kept the wolf from the door! We have written thank-you-notes to everyone. If we missed you....sorry and THANK YOU.

—Jude Siciliano, OP

The simple opening lines to today’s gospel might be passed over too lightly. One is tempted to “get to the story.” But we “get to the story” by paying attention to what may seem like a simple introductory phrase: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God....” Now that the Baptist is arrested, we know what will soon happen to him by Herod’s order. So, the atmosphere is froth with danger for anyone who follows after John. If the popular and influential John could be scooped up, immobilized and then executed--- what could Jesus expect? With the precursor gone, the attention now shifts to the one about whom John has been speaking: “One mightier than I is coming after me.” What Jesus is proclaiming, about the reign of God being at hand, certainly will attract the attention of those waiting for God to come to their aid--- the poor, outcasts, sinners and the neglected. But the message will also attract the ire of religious and political powers who don’t want their world of privilege threatened. Hostile and suspicious eyes will soon focus on this upstart preacher who seems to have stepped into John’s shoes.

Later in this gospel, in Gethsemani, Mark says Jesus was, “filled with fear and distress” (14:34). There, the evangelist narrates, Jesus prayed, “if it were possible this hour might pass him by” (14: 35) and he beseeched, “Abba, you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from me” (14:36). As is Mark’s custom, the agony in the garden is succinctly narrated. It shows a human’s reaction to an approaching painful death. Jesus could have left the garden and his mission behind. But Jesus was free to withdraw from his mission long before the choice placed before him in the garden. Jesus made choices all during his ministry to accept what was coming. He had to notice how his words and deeds were infuriating religious leaders who had connections with the Roman occupying

forces. Each time he decided to keep teaching his message of God's welcome to sinners; each time he ate with outcasts and called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites--- Jesus was deciding again to be faithful to his call to proclaim God's reign. But he was also taking another step that would seal his fate with the authorities ---another step towards his big decision in Gethsemani to accept what awaited him.

We each face many decisions in our lives; choices that carry some weight. These choices are often small, daily and seeming inconsequential in light of the overall picture of our lives. But in reality, the daily choices are important; they either further confirm our life's path, or they take us away from it—one step at a time. For Christians, who have heard the invitation, "Come after me...", the daily choices either identity us as Jesus' followers or they don't. If we spend our lives "going with the flow": never speaking a contrary word when an issue of fairness or justice is raised; never taking a stand to defend a person wronged or a cause we hold sacred; never risking love--- then, step after step, we have pretty well decided to ignore the call to be Jesus' followers.

Many of us, at some moment our lives, will have to make a big decision for right or wrong; for integrity or dissolution. When that moment comes, how we have been choosing on a daily basis, it will determine how we hold up under the big test. Jesus makes a decision to enter the public arena and fulfill his calling, despite the risks. It may not seem like a big event at this moment in the Mark's gospel; he hasn't gone before the crowds in Jerusalem; he is still in the "little leagues." But he is already preparing for his final "yes" in the garden. We say in the colloquial, "Don't sweat the small stuff." In a way we should, for the little things we do prepare us for the bigger moments when more is on the line. Recently I came across an account of people making big, life-altering decisions for the sake of honesty and integrity. It isn't a religious story; but then again, maybe it is....

Earlier this month "Time" magazine (January 6, 2003) named three "Persons of the Year." They are three women, from ordinary backgrounds, who decided to blow the whistle on the dishonesties and neglect they saw at work: Cynthia Cooper, vice-president at World Com, Sherron Watkins vice-president for Enron and Coleen Rowley, an FBI agent. We know their stories. Rowley criticized her beloved FBI and its leadership for its failures to pay attention to agents in the field; especially when she expressed her concern about Zacharias Moussaoui, whom she wanted investigated and wasn't. He was later tied in with the September 11<sup>th</sup>.

terrorists. Cooper and Watkins had good positions with two of the largest and most profitable companies in the U.S. But both detected unethical accounting practices, reported their findings to their C.E.O's, and when they were rebuffed, went public. As "Time" put it, "They were people who did right just by doing their jobs rightly, which means ferociously, with eyes open and with the bravery the rest of us always hope we have and may never know if we do."

These were three brave women who put their jobs, reputations and futures on the line to do what they knew to be right. They examined their situations, saw dishonesty or incompetence around them and decided to take the first step to address the problems. One step led to another. They weren't looking for publicity, in fact, for the most part, they have shunned it. They tried to keep their criticisms close at hand, trying, as "Time" put it, "to speak truth to power." Well, that is a sure prescription for trouble: to speak truth to power! Power doesn't want to hear any truth that will jeopardize its hold. Jesus knew and accepted the dangers of such truth-telling. In today's gospel, he invites us to follow him to do the same. His disciples are to be truth tellers and are sent to catch others for his project of making God and God's love known to all.

Jesus left the wilderness area and began preaching in the towns and villages. He is not an ascetical hermit who settles in the wilderness to rid himself of "the evils of society." Rather, he goes to where people live and work—Simon, Andrew, James and John were at work. There, at their work place, he delivers his invitation. Where do we expect to hear God's call? At the ocean or contemplating a mountain panorama? Where do we expect to hear the call to live a new or more committed life ("Repent and believe...")---only on a silence-filled retreat? Lord knows we could use more of those moments! But most of our lives don't provide a lot of time for gazing at the ocean or a mountain; nor do we have the luxury of a lot of silence to hear our "inner voices." We probably should provide for more of those opportunities; but in the meantime, three women set an example for us. They heard a call to take decisive steps to correct wrongs, and they responded with courage and boldness. Their lives show early signs of such behavior. Their parents taught them to do right and live honest lives. While still in grammar school, they spoke up when they perceived a wrong. They had plenty of daily preparation for the moment when they would face much larger challenges. Step by step they were forging future behavior. And when the moment came for a big step; they did the right thing. Cynthia Cooper's mother gave some good advice; "Never allow yourself to be intimidated; always think about the consequences of your actions."

At Enron, the employees had sticky note pads with a Martin Luther King, Jr quote: “Our lives being to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” The three women, “Persons of the Year,” seem to have lived that quote, in one way or another. These women heard a call each day to live lives of integrity and each day they did their best to respond. When the time came to make a life-altering decision in favor of what they believed, they responded. By their response, they challenge each of us to not “become silent about things that matter.”

Something like those words must have been in Jesus’ mind as he set out to proclaim the reign of God after the arrest of John the Baptist. From the beginning, Jesus made daily decisions to follow God’s will and proclaim the reign of God. From the beginning he would have known that his daily decision to be faithful to his mission would eventually put him on a collision course with the authorities of religion and state.

Here at the beginning of Mark’s gospel, we are responding once again to the invitation to follow Jesus and be his witnesses in the world. At this Eucharist, we ask for the Spirit that came upon Jesus in the Jordan when he was baptized by John. This Spirit will strengthen and confirm our resolve to follow Jesus; for on our own, we might take the short cuts that tempt us each day and that eventually get us to follow another voice on another path. But with the Spirit as our guide, we will take the steps that lead us to respond daily to Jesus’ invitation, “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

## PREACHING WORKSHOP

Aquinas Institute, in St. Louis, is having a two-week preaching workshop this June. It is a wonderful preaching program for lay and ordained preachers. If you want more information:

Summer Preaching Institute and Summer Studies Session  
<http://www.ai.edu/programs/academic/summer.html>

## JUSTICE NOTES

The U.S. Catholic bishops, addressing global warming, have reminded us that as moral beings, we are responsible for how we treat the environment. The bishops said:

“God has endowed humanity with reason and ingenuity that distinguish us from other creatures. Ingenuity and creativity have enabled us to make remarkable advances and can help us address the problem of global climate change; however, we have not always used these endowments wisely. Past actions have produced both good works and harmful ones, as well as unforeseen or unintended consequences. Now we face two central moral questions:

How are we to fulfill God's call to be stewards of creation in an age when we may have the capacity to alter that creation significantly, and perhaps irrevocably?”

How can we as a "family of nations" exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of God's creation and provides for the common good, as well as for economic and social progress based on justice?

-----*A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*-----June 15, 2001

In light of our duty to “exercise stewardship,” over the next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

1. Recycle newspaper, paper, cardboard, glass, tin, and aluminum.
2. Buy recycled products.
3. Use low- or phosphate-free detergent.
4. Wash clothes in cold water,
5. Use old clothes and cloth to wipe up spills and for cleaning instead of paper towels.
6. Reduce use of nonessential appliances (e.g., electric can openers, pencil sharpeners).
7. Reuse paper grocery bags.
8. Use reusable containers for sandwiches and leftovers instead of plastic wrap, baggies, and foil.
9. Install low-flow aerators on faucets and water-saving showerheads.
10. Do not leave water running when showering, shaving, brushing your teeth, washing dishes or your car.
11. Place space-occupiers in toilet tanks. (Do not use bricks or rocks; they can damage pipes.)
12. Insulate your water heater and set it at 130 degrees (cool enough to save energy, but hot enough to kill bacteria).

13. Fix leaky pipes.
14. Tune-up your furnace.
15. Lower thermostat one degree for every hour you will be away or asleep.

### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Willie Brown #0052205
- Wayne Laws #0234897
- Timothy Allen #0005205

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A.

If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

*Jude Siciliano, OP*

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