

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ...When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**Mark 1:14-20**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

**“Just a Glimpse”**

Jonah is a fearful man in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. His fear was that the Ninevites would hear the word he had been given, and believe it! You see the Ninevites were a brutal people towards Israel. Jonah felt they didn't deserve God's grace and steadfast love. He believed there was a chance that the people would believe the proclamation and repent, and he knew that God would be merciful. This is why he fled Tarshish when he first heard God's call to proclaim a word of repentance to Nineveh. He didn't want to be a part of God's mercy for them! The scriptures tell us only that the people of Nineveh finally did hear a reluctant Jonah say, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And they believed God and everyone from the very old to the tiny baby put on sackcloth, and entered a time of lament and fasting. Upon hearing Jonah's proclamation the King of Nineveh decreed that he and even the animals would fast and cover themselves in sackcloth and repent of their evil ways. "Who knows?" said the King, "God may relent...so that we do not perish." Jonah was right. The Ninevites believed and turned towards God's will and God was merciful towards them.

The author of Mark portrays Jesus as one who follows in the footsteps of John the Baptist and Jonah proclaiming repentance. But this repentance is one of fulfillment. For in Jesus the epiphany of God's reign has become incarnate. It has drawn near to them in the Christ. This repentance calls for belief too; belief in the good news. The good news contains within it every promise, ever hope we could ever dream of in relation to God. Forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, mercy, righteousness, love and peace. And so Mark's gospel tells us Jesus calls out, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." It is pretty clear that the fishermen have no idea what fishing for people will mean, except that it is a promise they can somehow tell Jesus will keep. And Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed him. Then Jesus called out to James and John and they followed too. They'd barely had time to take a quick look at Jesus, yet they believed.

God's tug on people's hearts to repent, believe and follow, can be recognized through a few words spoken by Jonah and Jesus to people who haven't been schooled in God's ways and Word. The folks in these stories are called to follow God with just a glimpse of who God is. Those who recognize God in the call do not know the details of God's plan for them. Yet their hope is placed squarely within the glimpse revealed. In acts of obedience, they follow God's commands and the scriptures show us that as folks followed God, more and more was revealed.

You and I are gathered together today because at some point or another, through grace, we glimpsed and recognized this same hope in God. Maybe it has been a long time since this hope was renewed in you. Maybe it was this morning. However it is and was for you, God's promise of transformation and assurance of grace is at work here within this church community.

We are coming up on an annual American tradition which will take place the last day of this month called the "State of the Union" address. Beginning with George Washington, U.S. Presidents and their administrations have sought to assess the condition of the union of these United States. Presidents have had varying degrees of success in actually claiming the fullness of the state our union is in and setting an agenda to reflect that state. When radio and TV broadcasts began the addresses began to shift in focus and unfortunately became more of a platform for justifying a particular agenda for the year.

We in the church have something to learn from our government's attempt to look ahead. In our Annual Meeting, which is the first Sunday of March this year, our time together will honor this past year. You could say the report is an assessment of the last year. But when and where do we look forward as a congregation? Unlike the President's State of the Union address our purpose in looking forward is not for us to set the agenda of this church, but for us to discern together what God's agenda is for us. We discern the "state of the church" through ongoing conversation that invites transformation as we continue to follow Jesus together. This conversation began before my arrival with your church surveys and the PNC's work as they spent time discerning from your input some of the ways God is calling Central Presbyterian Church in this time and place.

I have only been with you for six months, a very short duration of time. On both sides we've seen only seen a glimpse of who the other is. Some of us haven't even had a real conversation. Yet the Spirit has been at work laying the transformational seeds of new life and hope within each one of us long before we knew that we would be called together! God was guiding us to new life during your interim time and my years at Second Presbyterian.

Our ministry together is partly about our relationships with one another, but our focus stems from discerning what the Spirit of God is leading us to together. So I offer a few things I've heard are on your hearts and that I've glimpsed in my short time to help us discern where God is leading and to help assess the "state of our church."

The Session, Deacons and I had a wonderful retreat yesterday at Camp Asbury on Silver Lake. We had a good time, we fellowshiped, we took in a bit of nature, some more than others as one car got stuck in the mud and others helped to get that car unstuck. It was a time to see new perspectives and remember where we've been and what we've done in the past and look forward to our future together. We were led in this endeavor by a book written by a UCC minister Anthony Robinson called Transforming Congregational Culture. Robinson asked us to consider, "What is the business of the

church in this time and place?” By “business” he means our mission. Then he asks “How’s business going?” How is our mission going?

The mission of our church is set forth in our Mission Statement which was created before my time with you began. I’d like to read it to you now so we all have a framework to assess our church life together. It says “Central Presbyterian Church is a growing, caring and active Christian community of faith. We welcome all people into a warm, reflective, spiritually nurturing and joyous family of believers. We encourage and respect each other in our ministries and provide worship and Christian education for all ages with special concern for the young. With God’s help, we use our time and talents to promote a more humane, peaceful and just world through active support of social reform, mission and outreach both within and beyond our community. While valuing our unique Presbyterian heritage we promote ecumenical cooperation.” Our mission statement is solid. It is broad and will serve us well in the years to come.

The answers our church leaders gave to the questions Robinson raised for us, “What is the business of the church” and “How’s business going?” ranged from complacent in some parts of our life together, to steady movement in other areas, to noting new energy, claiming the tensions that exist here, evolving mission foci, renewed attention to the care of our members.

One leader said, “I’d like to see us open up more to the Spirit, to step back and give ourselves to discernment about how to live out our mission in this time and place. Let’s take the time to do our discernment in a spiritual way.” This is hard because true discernment takes time and God doesn’t give us the answers right away. We have to learn to wait together for some answers.

Another area we’ve become complacent in is our giving. We have a budget deficit again this year. And it’s quite large. The budget is not the session’s responsibility alone; it is the responsibility of the whole congregation. Our giving is a spiritual discipline and a joy! Since this is our second deficit year in a row, we have some work to do about assessing our mission priorities and reinvigorating our individual commitments to yearly pledging. Times when the church is short in resources are times that we have the opportunity to open ourselves to discernment and the calling to set our priorities to make them clear. Our Stewardship and Finance commission needs your help. We all have opportunity to jump in and help transform our current financial state through raising the bar for our giving on a congregational level.

In the Mission Statement we claim we believe that we give priority to education and activities for “the young.” In today’s world that also means support for parents and individuals seeking to raise our youth in church. Many of our youth and parents are stretched thin by the hectic pace of their lives today. We have begun working on a youth group and it has been difficult to start something up. To have an actual youth program with regular educational, social and missional opportunities will take a commitment of resources from the entire congregation. We need committed leaders who are willing to be on the journey of faith with our youth. This is an exciting challenge and opportunity before us and it will require some risk on our parts! There is a task force for our open Christian Education Position to have someone to direct and lead our educational endeavors. Please pray for the eight members of this task force and share with them your dreams for our Christian education.

An area of growth in recent years has been your desire for hands-on mission outreach. Your work with Habitat for Humanity, the Mexico Mission Trip and recently, the trip with Livingston County Cares show this yearning we have for going out with our church family to encounter and serve others. I have a hope for some family friendly mission opportunities to develop in our local community, so our families with children can begin to share in that part of discipleship to Christ and can learn the way with one another.

I am convinced that discernment over new ways God may be leading is nothing new to this congregation, because I've already seen you take risks. We risked opening our Center Street house to a family in need, displaced from Katrina. You were more than willing to enter this time of risk and uncertainty about where the family would come from and how we would fully provide for them. We survived when it didn't work out as we had hoped and our family returned to Mississippi after only 1½ months. We now have renewed energy for discerning our call regarding a missional use of our Center Street property this year. I invite you to join a special task force that will begin discerning the future of our property in March or April of this year.

Our glimpses of God, the brief moments where we see clearly, will shape our lives of discipleship if we engage in discerning them together. I look forward to continuing to discern with you how to follow God in this time and place and to see the fruit of this discernment flourish. May we all be open to following the Spirit as it stirs, shakes and moves us toward transformation together! Amen.