

Let's play word association. I'll say a word, and you say the first word that comes to your mind. Out loud, OK? Here we go: "Jonah." "Whale". Very good. Today's first reading comes from the book of Jonah, but it never mentions that darn whale. Jonah could have been a hairdresser for all we hear today. This passage starts where the whale left off, vomiting Jonah up on the shore of Nineveh, where God says, "Now that you're here, tell these people to repent." Jonah, a man of few words, says "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" In Jonah's original language, you can say that sentence in four words. After four words, the people of Nineveh believed in a new God, the king sat in ashes, every living creature fasted from food and water and put on sackcloth--even the animals. I'd love to have seen this. How do you put sackcloth on a chicken? Certainly we'll see buffalo in sackcloth by (tomorrow/the end of the day). This is a story of instant conversion: People had been living one way; now immediately they live another way.

Sometimes four words can convert us. We'll change our ways if the words come from people we love or respect: "Go see a doctor." "Try some new clothes." "Your resume needs work." "I voted against it." "Why can't I go?" "Will you marry me?" "Chiefs 28, Oilers 20." We may resist conversion; we may get angry when people say those things. But we're always changing our minds. New information makes us look at old information differently, until one day four words may put us over the edge and make us change sides.

Jesus asks that kind of change when he walks away from his baptism at the Jordan and begins his preaching with four words which shake world history: "The time is fulfilled." He goes on, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." Those few lines summarize the preaching of Jesus throughout Mark's Gospel. "Things are different now," Jesus says. "What you must do is change your ways and let the Gospel direct your decisions." Just as the people of Nineveh changed immediately at the preaching of Jonah, so James and John drop their nets, leave their father, and follow Jesus.

God is always at work in the human heart, even when you can't figure out what to do. When you hear the words that make it clear, drop your nets, and follow Christ.