

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
20 September 2020

Jonah 3:10-4:11

A kindergarten teacher was telling her students about different kinds of animals. "Whales are the largest" she said, "but they can't swallow people, because their throats are too small." A little girl sitting in the front responded, "But in the Bible, it says that Jonah was swallowed by a whale." Frustrated by the interruption, the teacher replied, "You can't always believe what you read." Not giving up, the girl said, "Well, when I go to heaven, I will ask Jonah." The teacher smiled and said, "And what if Jonah went to hell?" Smiling back, the girl replied, "In that case, you can ask him yourself."

Today, we have the Jonah story. This story is one of the best known in the entire Bible. Let me briefly summarize the first part of the story. The people of Nineveh had been historical enemies of Israel for centuries. At some point in their history their sinful behaviors came to God's attention and he decided to destroy them. Before he proceeded with his plans, God decided to give them one last chance at repentance. God then called on Jonah to deliver a message to his enemies. Repent or perish.

Jonah was displeased with the idea of warning the nation's enemies of their impending destruction. Rather than going to Nineveh, he escaped from God catching a boat to modern-day Spain. At some point during the boat ride, heavy storms threatened to capsize the small vessel. The crew began to wonder whose fault it is that the gods are causing the storm. Jonah confessed that he was trying to escape from his God. He then proposed that they throw him overboard to appease God. Once they did this, the winds stopped and the crew was saved, causing them to "Worship the God of Noah."

While Jonah was swimming, a whale swallowed him whole, but then the whale remembered that she was vegetarian and she threw up Jonah at a local shoreline. God gave Jonah sometime to clean up and deal with his wounded ego before he returned to him a second time and told him "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." And this brings us to the passage for today.

The passage tells us that Nineveh is about sixty miles in length from east to west. Jonah walks about 20 miles in and makes a quick proclamation about the city's impending doom. He doesn't even go halfway in. He is a prophet under duress. He will deliver the message, but he will do it reluctantly, hoping no one will pay attention to him, and the enemies will perish. He then withdraws to watch what will happen to the city. Much to his surprise and aggravation, the city and even the animals repent and proclaim a fast, putting on penitential sackcloth. When the king orders the fast, he says, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." Pay attention to this phrase because this is the key of the passage.

The king was right. Verse 10 tells us that God changed his mind about the destruction of the city. Jonah became angry and prayed to God, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Then Jonah tells God three times, “Just kill me now!” Three times, once during his prayer, once when the tree the Lord uses as a parable dies, “It is better for me to die than to live,” he says. The third time is when God confronts him about his anger. He says, “I am angry enough to die.” The story ends with God telling Jonah, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city?” Now, what do we make of this funny little story? Do we believe it literally and do an archeological dig until we find the man-eating whale? Do we see it as a moralistic lesson about what could happen if we run away from God? Do we see it as a funny children’s story meant to entertain and make kids laugh? How do we see this? Perhaps it would help if we understand the possible reason why the story was written in the first place.

I believe this story is a further development or commentary on a Biblical passage the author wants to explain or highlight. This is called Midrash in Jewish literature. “Midrashic texts overflow with puns, wordplay, and reversal of letters, alliteration, and allegory.” (Myjewishlearning.com.) In other words, you often know a text is a commentary of another passage because the name given to it is a reversal of the letters of a famous story. In this case, you may want to know that Jonah in Hebrew is a reversal of the letters of the word Noah. I believe Jonah is the anti-hero of Noah. Whereas Noah obeys God and builds an ark in the desert, dealing with ridicule and mocking from his neighbors, Jonah refuses to obey and tries to escape from God. Whereas Noah goes all in, Jonah walks in one third of the way. Whereas Noah is saved at the end, resting comfortably in the body of the ark while the waters rise, Jonah finds great discomfort in the body of the whale who has swallowed him whole. Yet, he is also saved. The writer of the story has given us an anti-hero in Jonah to highlight the obedience of his hero, Noah.

I do believe the story serves another purpose. When I was reading the command of the King of Ninevah and Jonah’s prayer to God, the words they used sounded very familiar to me. I had read those words before in another book of scripture. I then found a commentator who made the connection between these passages. Remember that a Midrash or commentary often seeks to highlight people or teachings by building stories about them. It is as if I want to teach a child the value of telling the truth, but rather than saying, “Lying could be dangerous,” or “A good person never lies,” I just tell the child the story of the boy who cried wolf. I believe what we have here in this little story of Jonah is like that. So, let me compare Jonah to that other text of Scripture.

The Book of Joel 2:12-14a reads as follows, “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing.” Now let me read the King’s command and Jonah’s prayer. The King says, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” Jonah says, “O LORD! I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Putting together both statements, we get the passage from Joel almost verbatim.

I believe the author of Jonah wants to teach about the many ways in which God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and how God relents from sending calamity to those who repent. Rather than a long instructional book about God’s mercy, the author composes a funny little story that works very well in teaching the same lesson. God is so loving that he is willing to save even his enemies. The story is not so much about this disobedient character we call Jonah, but it is about God’s love and compassion for sinners everywhere. And it is here where the story of Jonah becomes great news for us. No wonder Jesus of Nazareth makes a reference to the sign of Jonah in Luke 11:28-30, “This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.”

The story is not really about the many ways we try to run away from God. This is a moralistic interpretation that places Jonah or us as the main character of the story. But the story is about God’s love for sinners. God is the real central character of this story. God loves humanity so much that he is willing to save even the Ninevites, the very capital of the Assyrian Empire, which had caused tremendous pain on Israel. They were the enemies, the pagans, the nations. Yet, God relents in his judgement and saves the Ninevites after they repent. And this act reminds me of another act of salvation. At the right time in history, God sent his own Son to save his enemies. His Son, unlike Jonah, went all in. He was willing to die on a cross to deliver the salvation God intended for his people. This is the good news of Jonah today. We have a God who loves us so much he will go through any extent to save us. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.”

I pray that today you and I, Ninevites and Jonah-types, people who don’t know our right hand from our left, may realize how much God loves us. I pray you open your eyes to God’s grace and reach out to him in gratitude. He loves you greatly and he is neither repelled nor appalled by your pain. Reach out to him because he seeks to have a relationship with you. May he continue to bless you. Amen!