

Sunday, January 21, 2024
Psalm 62:5-12; Jonah 1, 2, 3 (various verses)
A Whale of a Tale
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

In the year 1891, a whaling ship named “Star of the East” operating off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, spotted a whale. The harpoon boats were launched and the whale was successfully speared. However, in the turbulence that followed by the whale, one of the smaller boats capsized, throwing two crew members into the sea. One of them drowned and the other, a man named James Bartley, disappeared. The whale was eventually subdued and hoisted onto the ship, where the crew started to work on the whale’s body. After a day or so, they reached the stomach and cut it open to find James Bartley, unconscious, but alive. Doused with sea water, put in the captain’s cabin to rest, after a couple weeks, even though his skin was slightly disfigured, he actually managed to recover. He is quoted as saying he remembers flying through the air when the whale struck the boat with its tail, and then suddenly being in darkness and then . . . well, you don’t need to hear the details so close to breakfast. (1) It’s a whale of a tale!

Last Sunday and this Sunday the scripture passages are about our call, the invitation of Jesus to “follow me” last week, and the Prophet Jonah’s call this week. And who doesn’t love the story of Jonah and the Whale. As children most of us were taught that this is a true story and now you may think, well, maybe it was! And we were taught that Jonah is the story of the defiant prophet who attempted to shirk his duty of preaching impending judgment against Nineveh. We know how God chased and caught Jonah; that Jonah grudgingly carried out his responsibility and preached to Nineveh; that Nineveh repented and God spared them. But that is just the beginning of what this tale is really all about, for Jonah is really a story about prejudice, exclusion, those chosen, those not chosen, God’s justice and mercy, and God’s greatest commandment – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37-40)

The book of Jonah is very different because it is what is known as a Prose narrative for it is an account about the prophet himself, not just what he prophesized about and to whom, but what happens to him. It is also significant because Jesus refers to Jonah when he states, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” (Matt. 12:40) And Jesus goes on to talk about the people of Nineveh and how salvation is for all. But Jonah is also the most unique of all prophetic books with a powerful message for all who are called to be a follower of God, disciples of Christ. So, let’s explore this story.

In the very first verses we learn that Jonah is not like any other prophet. Back then, when the word of God came to a prophet, it was their duty to respond. Oh, there were other prophets who received a call from God and questioned God. God told Moses to speak to Pharaoh, and Moses told the Lord he couldn’t because he was kind of a poor speaker and suggested God send my brother Aaron instead. Jeremiah told God he was much too young to represent God, maybe he should find someone with more experience. Amos and Isaiah felt their message was too dreadful to announce, maybe they could change it just a bit? The difference here is that Jonah didn’t question God, Jonah didn’t argue with God – he just ran. As

a matter of fact, he takes off to the furthest point in the most opposite direction of Nineveh one could possibly go, and buys a ticket on a slow boat to Tarshish, somewhere near Spain. Why? It doesn't say at first! Was he afraid? Was he indifferent? Was he crazy? But the answer to the question "why" reveals the entire message of this story.

Now the book of Jonah was written during the time when hardships, foreign reign and exilic promises were not fulfilled. Nineveh, the capital of the great empire Assyria, was a hated oppressor of Judah, for it had conquered and destroyed the entire northern kingdom. Nineveh was known for its cruelty, hatred, intimidation through extreme violence, and evil ways. Nineveh was also filled with Gentiles, pagan worshippers, those not of the chosen nation of Hebrews. That's important. The problem for Jonah – who by the way, represents all people of Judah at that time, a symbol of the entire Hebrew nation back then – is that he truly believed he was part of God's only chosen people, and that all others were technically, un-chosen – different, inferior, definitely not worthy of his time. Why in the world would God want Jonah to preach a word of repentance to such people – people who many believed deserved to die, people who many believed should die if God is a God of justice.

And so you would think Jonah would love to tell these people he hates so much, these unchosen cruel murders – 40 days and you will all be destroyed – take that! But he doesn't – and in the end we find out why.

The story begins with Jonah's downward descent into escape, and the upward ascent of others into God's presence. After Jonah's quick escape, he travels down to Joppa, goes down into the ship and lays down to sleep. Now back then people believed one's "god", there were many, caused weather for a reason. So when God causes a great wind upon the sea which threatens to destroy the entire ship, the Sailors, who by the way represent the people of Nineveh or all Gentile people, all non-Hebrews. The sailors knew this storm was caused by someone who behaved badly and their god was reacting. So as they question, their eyes are opened, and they begin to believe in this powerful God who threatens their ship and their lives. It's a double jeopardy though – if they don't throw Jonah overboard, they will die, and if they do, they will die because their belief was that they should never kill or destroy. So they pray for forgiveness to this new God of Jonah, the God of the wind and the sea and the dry land and they cast him into the sea. The storm ceases and their fear turns from terror to awestruck, and they commit themselves to this God and worship him. Just like the Ninevites will at the end of our story.

As one scholar writes, the sailors also represent the entire human condition, us today – threatened by shipwreck, dangerous natural disasters, frightening circumstances, we tend to draw together. Threatened by shipwreck, painful personal circumstances, the diagnosis we dreaded, we tend to free ourselves from material possessions or habits or other baggage which weighs down our lives, realizing what is most important is life, life in relationship with those we love. Threatened by shipwreck, terrifying situations, the death and loss we did not expect, we tend to turn to God and prayer, for answers to our questions, for forgiveness, for acceptance, and try to be open to a new understanding about life and love. (2)

Jonah, (the people of Judah) was called by God to be a light to all nations, but instead had become exclusive, wishing only that God would get to work on his behalf and punish his enemies, certainly not care about anyone else but him! It is through the questioning of the sailors and their understanding and belief, and Jonah is transformed and moves from

disobedience to obedience, and accepts responsibility for his actions. He even makes himself into an offering, a sacrifice on the behalf of others, a gift to be lifted up and cast out to die. As the storm ceases, the sailors continue their voyage on a calm ocean, but Jonah falls again to the very bottom of the seas, only then to be saved, given a second chance by taking up residence in the belly of a great fish, three days and three nights.

And when God shows mercy and Jonah is then spewed up onto dry land by the fish, it is then that he given this second chance, and Jonah finally goes to Nineveh. And Jonah only speaks 8 words to the people of Nineveh, "forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown" and the response is immediate. The people declare a fast, the king, not to be outdone, orders humans and animals alike to fast and put on sackcloth, all repent. And if you think the image of sheep and cows wearing sackcloth diapers funny – its supposed to be what some call "a comical over-doing of repentance". And the question - if those bloodthirsty folks whose society was built on violence are able to passionately repent and move God's heart, how much more should God's beloved community, Jonah and the people, the people of God's pasture, avail themselves of God's abundant mercy by turning from their evil ways that hurt and harm others?

So you would think Jonah would be ecstatic. As one pastor states, "after all, he's the only really successful prophet in the whole Bible. He has brought about a mass conversion that Billy Graham could only aspire to. Every inhabitant of the city, human and animal alike, has come forward for the altar call." (3) But Jonah, Jonah's mad, really mad. He yells at God and basically says, "this is why I fled in the first place. Because I know that you are a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. I knew this would happen!" That's the answer to our question. That's why he fled, yes, he wanted to see these people punished for their bad behavior, yes, he felt he was above them and didn't want anything to do with them, but more than all that, he knew, he knew, if he delivered the message from God, the same God who gave Jonah a second chance, would give the people of Nineveh a second chance.

Because here is the thing all of us have find out about following the call of God in and through the waters: God is God and doesn't act as we think, doesn't respond as we think, not always. So take a moment and think about those in your life who are just difficult to love. We might be so bold as to say, those you hate. I'm not talking about those who are abusive, let me make that clear. What does it feel like to hear that God loves them and God loves you. The same God who gave Jonah a second chance gives the people of Nineveh a second chance, and that is mercy.

You see, Jonah also represents the entire human condition as one who comes to realize his own sin and seeks atonement. There is a reason why even today in many Jewish Synagogues you will hear a complete reading of the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Jonah also represents one who is willing to save the lives of others, help others, by sacrificing or giving up, maybe even his own life for others. There is a reason why Jesus refers to the book of Jonah, when referring to his own sacrifice on behalf of the salvation of others. God is a God of mercy and acceptance, forgiveness and love not just for some but for all. How many of us love to lean on our own ideas of who gets justice and who deserves judgement? Who is your Nineveh?

We have to admit that the Book of Jonah contains a lot of humor, doesn't it? We too tend to smile when we think of Jonah hearing the word of God and scampering off in the opposite

direction only to find he can't ever escape God. We laugh as we picture the hairy prophet being swallowed by a whale, sea monster, huge fish - whatever translation you like - and later being literally coughed up, reeking of fish, scampering this time, to Nineveh to fulfill his mission. But underneath the humor, as it was for the first audiences of old, we are to see the underlying carefully constructed theological message. This is a story about moral ambiguity, personal judgment, and divine grace. It is a story written by a one person living during that time who believed God was a God of mercy, believed that the chosen nation was to spread the love of God and learn to love all people. So he wrote a story using the name of a well-known prophet, a story that would make people laugh and then think, question judgments and value systems, and reveal a God of hope, a God of love.

What does the book of Jonah teach us about God? First, God calls us to surprising, even ridiculous things. Second, God journeys with us, even in our stubborn rebellion. Third, God's love is extraordinary, a steadfast love that is our salvation. All are created in the image of God, all can repent and be forgiven, all are loved by God. So, did Jonah actually go into the belly of a whale or large sea creature and survive three days – could it have happened, well it did to James Bartley, but even if it's just a funny story, it's also a whale of a tale that makes us all think – how do we love God with all our heart, soul and strength – and who are our neighbors and do we really love them all? Amen.

1) David, Dr. Edward B. "A Modern Jonah" www.reasons.org.

2) The Interpreter's Bible, p. 502.

3) Schifferdecker, The Rev. Kathryn M. "Jonah is more than just a big fish tale."