

It's (Not) a Big Fish Story

The Georgetown Presbyterian Church II Washington, DC

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First Reading - Jonah 1:1-6, 11-17, 2:1, 10

1Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. ¹⁷But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ...

¹⁰Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Our second reading picks up where the first reading left off, as the fish spits Jonah onto dry land and we pick up there.

Second Reading - Jonah 3:1-10, 4:1-4, 11

3 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

³So 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.

⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

¹⁰When 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.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the Lord and said, “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. ³And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

This is the story of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

*Oh the tale of a whale is a whale of a tale, it's a story of the deep blue sea.
About a fish and a man named Jonah, who was a lot like you and me.¹*

I could go on! I could do the whole musical for you.

This is probably one of the best known bible stories.

It's such a great story!

A villain. A reluctant hero. A storm at sea. A big fish. A happy ending.

I'm not going to talk much about the part we all know — the part about the big fish. (Though I recommend you google the video of a humpback whale accidentally gulping up two kayakers. The whale spit them back out and both they and the whale were ok, but it's worth watching)

So we're not going to talk about the big fish this morning. We're going to talk about the rest of the story.

First of all, Nineveh, "that great city," whose wickedness had come up before the Lord, the text says. Nineveh, now modern day Mosul in northern Iraq, was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire back around 700 BCE. For a time it was a flourishing capital city, perhaps even the largest in the world with as many as 150,000 people living within its walls. It had grand architecture and canal systems, orderly streets and dramatic art carvings.

But for Jonah, Nineveh wasn't "that great city." The Assyrians, remember, decimated Israel and deported its citizens. Because of Nineveh, Israel became known as the ten lost tribes. In the Hebrew scriptures, Nineveh represented terrorism and violence. As I try to wrap my head around what

¹ Oh Jonah, a musical by Allen Pote.

Nineveh symbolized for Jonah, I think of Auschwitz or Robben Island or the slave castles on the Ivory Coast.² Places of pain and evil.

And yet the text tells us Nineveh is a great city. Literally the Hebrew phrase means "great to God." I don't know what we're supposed to make of Nineveh, the city "Great to God," the city whose wickedness had come before the Lord, the city known to Jonah as pain and evil.

Perhaps it is to remind us the danger of a single narrative.

Perhaps it is to remind us that we are never defined solely by the worst parts of us; nor by the best.

Perhaps it is to remind us that nothing is outside God's radical grace, while at the same time that grace involves judgment.

We have this thriving city, great to God, that is also known to the people of God as a place of pain and evil, and known to God to be wicked.

And that's where Jonah is told to go. Jonah, like many of the prophets, resists God's call, fleeing to Tarshish by boat and there's the whole part about the big fish. Which was enough for Jonah to give in and go to Nineveh. No doubt.

When he gets to Nineveh Jonah preaches the best sermon ever preached in the history of humankind. You ready for it?

"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That's all he says.

Don't you just think God is in the background going, "Say it like you mean it, Jonah."

² Thanks to Meg Peery McLaughlin for some of this description and in particular the images of Auschwitz and Robben Island. From a paper for The Well in 2016.

But you know what? Jonah's sermon worked. The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloths.

Or, rather, it kind of works. It's not clear from the text that this is a Ninevites coming to faith story so much as an "We're in serious trouble and should perhaps make a different choice" story.³

But regardless the people change their ways. The king falls in line, too. He joins in the fast and sack clothes, and makes it all official. He acknowledges the evil and violence of his people. Which is in no political playbook anywhere ever, it seems. It's kind of refreshing. And, the king says, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; God may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

And it works out ok for Nineveh.

¹⁰When 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
And they all lived happily ever after.

That's just the kind of thing you'd expect to hear in church, isn't it? To be reminded of God's amazing grace, even for the wicked. To hear a story of a people repenting of their evil ways and God granting mercy.

Truth be told, it's so predictable of what we are used to hearing in church, I wonder if we even take it in.

Because I want you to pause and think about it for a minute. The Ninevites — the enemy of the people of Israel; the wicked city, the ones responsible for violence and pain — they receive mercy.

³ New Interpreters Bible. Phyllis Trible. Abingdon, 1996. p. 484.

What if we sub out Nineveh and sub in Hamas? Or sub out Nineveh and sub in the Israeli military? Or sub out Nineveh and sub in woke culture? Or deplorables?

It's harder to stomach grace when it's our own enemies we're talking about.

Which is why Jonah is spitting mad with God.

He didn't want this wicked city to be spared, even if they did repent.

Jonah wanted an eye for an eye.

Jonah wanted vengeance. Don't we all.

And what he got instead was...grace.⁴

And he yells at God, that this — THIS — is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning. For I KNEW that you are a gracious God and merciful. I KNEW you are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I KNEW you would relent from punishing.

This is so unbearable, Jonah says, I would rather die.

It seems to me there is a lot in our country (and our world) right now that profits from dividing us into us and them. That benefits from us not only disagreeing with one another but being disgusted with one another. And it's a slippery slope moving from disgust to demonizing to dehumanizing to violence.

And it feels good. It feels righteous. "They got what's coming to them," after all.

But, church, it is not of God.

My friend and colleague Tom Are says it's not the blurry parts of the gospel that keep him awake at night; it's the things he knows to be true. The parts where we are asked to love our enemies, to forgive 70 times 7. To pray for

⁴ Thanks again to Meg Peery McLaughlin for putting it this way.

those who persecute us, to be generous with our wealth, to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others.

It's a tall order, living this way. It's out of step with our culture. It's unreasonable, even. But it is what we commit to doing as we seek to follow Christ.

November 6, 1956 was a Tuesday. It was election day. President Eisenhower defeated Adlai Stevenson. At the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. King preached a sermon to his congregation in which he challenged them to continue the struggle for civil rights. And he said this:

Always be sure that you [take up the] struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

...

I still believe [he preached] that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.⁵

No bitterness.

Use only the weapon of love.

Let no one pull you so low as to hate him.

Do not succumb to the temptation of violence.

Love your enemies.

⁵ "The Most Durable Power," Excerpt from Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on 6 November 1956. This excerpt was published in the 5 June 1957 Christian Century.

Do the will of God.

It's a tall order, living this way, in accordance with the gospel. It's out of step with our culture. It's unreasonable, even.

It makes me wonder if we don't need to spend more time and energy cultivating the religious and spiritual fortitude we need live out these gospel principles in our lives today, in these polarized times. Because the truth it's tempting to run the other way. It's tempting to cower in the hull of a ship and take a nap. It's tempting to water down the gospel to make it a bit more palatable, a little more doable, a bit more reasonable.

But that's not what we've committed our lives to, friends. We've committed our lives to following the will of God. And it is hard at times. It takes courage. It brings us to our knees. But it is also life that is truly life. That's the promise. Life that is truly life.

So let me close with a prayer from Dr. Walter Brueggemann this morning: "As we seek to answer your call [O God], may we be haunted by your large purposes."⁶

Amen.

⁶ Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth. p. 31.