

A Whale of a Tale

Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The book of the prophet Jonah, short as it is – a mere four chapters – contains three miraculous stories, each one more astounding and miraculous than the last. In those stories are some very important miracles of discipleship.

There is, of course, the first story that most of us know. It is the story of the call of the prophet Jonah. In this story, Jonah at some unknown point in time is called by God to go to the capital city of Assyria, Nineveh, and cry out against it because of its wickedness. It is a simple enough task. Jonah, however, finds this call not at all to his taste and so he promptly heads in the other direction. Whereas Nineveh is several hundred miles inland from Israel, in what is now northern Iraq, Jonah heads the other way and decides to take a Mediterranean cruise. He should have known better. The Lord God of Israel is hardly a landlocked deity and so no sooner has the boat set sail than God causes a storm to break out, endangering it gravely. Now, the sailors on board know their weather patterns, and immediately realize that this storm was not in the forecast and that therefore the calamitous storm must be on account of somebody or other on the ship. They therefore cast lots to find out who it is. Of course, Jonah is the one who gets the short straw. He confesses to the others on the ship that he is fleeing from the Lord. Willing for once to take responsibility, he then counsels them to throw him overboard and save themselves. Although they are not Israelites, they are reluctant to do so until there is no other way left open to them. Even then they pray that they might be innocent of shedding his blood.

Now, here is the part we know best. Immediately after Jonah is pitched overboard, he is swallowed by a great fish, and he remains in the fish's belly for three days until, after a prayer for deliverance made with great contrition, the fish spews him out on dry land. A great miracle to be

sure, but the moral of the story is perhaps more important than the miracle itself, for the moral of the story is that when you are called by name to serve, you can run but you can't hide and that whatever God wills to be done, will be done. Remembering the calls of Samuel and Nathaniel that we read last week, Jonah serves as an illustrative punctuation point to what is involved in being called by name.

A whale of a tale to be sure. It is not, however, the most important part of this book. That part comes in what happens afterwards.

No sooner is Jonah dried out than the word of the Lord is heard again telling Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time he goes, distasteful as the task is to him. In order to understand why it is so distasteful to him, it is helpful to understand a little of Assyria and its capital Nineveh. Nineveh's wickedness was indeed very real. The Assyrians had gained for themselves a great empire and they did not gain it by diplomacy, increased economic opportunity or sweetness and light. They were one of the cruelest people ever to run over the ancient Middle East. Not only were they conquerors, in their conquering and destruction they sought to terrify and humiliate, and they were good at it. For them the art of governing consisted of terror and humiliation. Delicacy forbids that I give specific examples here, although it can be pointed out that the Assyrians were the ones who invented the idea of deporting conquered peoples from their homelands so that those people finding themselves in a strange place might be more docile. Indeed, in 721 BC when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, they scattered the Israelites all over the Middle East, leaving only the southern kingdom of Judah intact. Israel, in distinction from Judah, never existed as a nation again. It is small wonder then that Jonah had no enthusiasm for going to Nineveh. Not only did his human sensibilities rebel against this violent people, Nineveh was also the capital of *his* hated and oppressive enemy.

Still, he finally went and preached in Nineveh. Here is the second miraculous story, for we are told that proud, cruel and arrogant as the Assyrians were, they actually listened to what Jonah had to say, and they actually repented.

It is a miracle that the proud, powerful and arrogant ever repent. There is something about power that maddens us to the point that once we have it we think we are a species apart from the rest of the human race. The powerful often think that their power is either by divine right and favor or that they are divine themselves. Although there is what appears to be an unalterable law concerning the rise and fall of nations, each nation once it becomes powerful believes that it is an exception. Assyria did, Babylon did, Rome did, Nazi Germany did. Each penny ante dictator and far too many CEOs making millions believe much the same thing. They think they are not like other people. They are not like the weak, and to prove the point they can never let themselves think that they are or show any weakness. So it is a miracle that the Ninevites repent. It is a miracle first because it seems to go against nature itself that the powerful would admit wrong or that there is anything more powerful than they in front of which they need to repent. It is also a miracle because this violation of the nature of human pride is in response to God's word, for all true miracles are a response to God's saving word.

It is here that the third miraculous story needs to be told. Jonah, after preaching his hell, fire and brimstone sermon to the Ninevites retires from the city in order to perch himself on a hill so that he may watch at his leisure and with great pleasure the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah is a member of people that has suffered greatly because of the Assyrians. They have suffered physically and they have suffered morally, and have been deprived of their land. They have been humiliated and heaven itself has been insulted. If the God they worship is indeed the Lord of heaven and earth, then not only has Assyrian power competed with God's power head-on,

Assyrian arrogance in treating the Israelites, who were God's chosen people, the way it did, was blasphemy and a sin, just as it was in Germany twenty-five hundred years later. And, as we all know, anger and desire for vengeance is born when we are not given due respect, when we are slighted and made smaller than we are. Justice demands that true proportions be re-established. So Jonah perches himself on a hill waiting for justice, waiting for vengeance.

But, of course, the Ninevites are not destroyed by hell, fire, and brimstone. Miracle of miracles, they repent. We are told flat out that this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry, although he admits that he suspected God would do something like this. That was why he fled in the first place, knowing that if he preached repentance, given God's merciful nature, the Ninevites might actually listen and not be destroyed. Jonah knew that miracles like this one could occur and he didn't want this one to happen.

This is where the third miraculous story must be told, at least it is miraculous if at the end Jonah gets the point. What happens is this: Jonah goes off to sulk, hoping that Nineveh might still be destroyed. Since waiting in the hot desert sun is no picnic by the lake, Jonah builds himself a nice little booth for shelter. God himself provides for Jonah's comfort by causing a tree to grow over Jonah for further shade. Jonah, we are told, was very happy about this. But, as the story continues, the next morning God caused a worm to destroy the tree and thus Jonah's shade. He also added a strong east wind to further increase Jonah's discomfort. Jonah is again angry, angry enough that he wishes he were dead. But then God says this to him:

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, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from the left and many animals?

So ends the book of Jonah, but assuming that Jonah actually listened to this concluding speech and humbly gave us his anger and resentment, looking at things from God's point of view, we have a final, third miracle, a miracle no less astounding than the repentance of the powerful. Anger and the desire for vengeance are easily dissipated when injustice is avenged, when true proportions are re-established. But it is a miracle, also connected to God's word, when they disappear without returning evil for evil. That is the miracle of repentance and forgiveness on the part of those who have been wronged. Jonah and the Israelites had every reason to hate the Assyrians as blacks have reason to hate whites, as Kosovars to hate Serbs, as Palestinians to hate Jews, as Jews to hate Christians, as Arabs to hate Americans and vice versa, as every people do who have been unjustly denied their rightful place in the sun, and it is a miracle when they can give up that anger and desire for vengeance. Why?

Because surely the question that looms large in Jonah's mind, as it does in the mind of everyone who has been treated badly and with proud arrogance is "if the oppressors are forgiven, how could God let them get away with it?" It is hard to give up that question. But God gives the answer here. The answer is that he forgives our enemies for the same reason that he forgives us, just as, for example, he had forgiven Jonah when he defied him. It is because he loves, because he prefers righteousness to evil and sin, and prefers repentance to destruction. It is a great miracle when what takes place in the hearts of the wronged is that there are things for which they ought to repent, too. When that thought grabs them it is as great a miracle as when the thought of repentance dawns on and grabs the powerful.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus called the disciples, but he also called a world to repent. In fact, his very first words in the Gospel of Mark are "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." He called the proud and

powerful Romans to repent, but he also called the insulted Jews to do so, also. I don't think he confused the two; still, the kingdom of God comes near when both, no matter what their problems and the gravity of their sin, take that good news to heart and when both tell it to each other.

There are thus a couple of important tasks of discipleship that are involved in taking that news to heart. First, is that we like Jonah are called to go out and tell the truth and the good news. Often it is to people we don't like and actually wish would *not* repent because we are afraid that they might actually be forgiven. Sometimes therefore when we do tell them the good news, we tell it in such a way that is calculated to turn them off so that they won't change. So we have to tell the good news as *good* news, and we have to work for the kingdom, because God has called us to do it, and because God will have the work done, and because God loves our enemies as much as he loves us. There is no escaping telling the world that.

But there is also more as Jonah found out for, second, the good news also requires repentance on part. Sometimes that means giving up power, as the Ninevites had to do. It especially means giving up the illusion that we are an exception, and it means recognizing that just because we have power we are not necessarily good nor are we everything that the world aspires to be. That is especially important and pressing for us as a nation since we are powerful. It is easy enough for Americans or multi-national corporations to say that we are not like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or even the Romans. That may be true enough; we have not paraded the heads of captives around the city walls impaled on pikes. But still nobody wields as much power as we do – and it is a lot more than the Assyrians ever had – without pushing somebody around. It is almost always the case that when the powerful move that others do get stepped on, that others do not have their consent asked for, and that others' lives are suddenly no longer their

own when they come within the orbit of the powerful. Ask a whole lot of people who are currently without jobs because their very powerful employers took greedy risks that put their own people in peril, or ask anybody from another nation whose economy has been devastated by a change in the spending habits of single other big country. It is small wonder that they get angry and wish we would go to hell so that the score might be evened. At some point, we do need to repent of the violence, even if we didn't mean it. At some point we need to pray for this miracle.

But, of course, in our lives we are not always the powerful, at least as individuals. Sometimes therefore repentance means something quite different than giving up power; as Jonah had to learn, sometimes repentance means giving up anger, resentment and the desire for vengeance. Sometimes it means rejoicing when miracles take place in the lives of others, taking to heart the thought that God does care for all his creation. Sometimes it means looking for that miracle in our own hearts.

All of that is what the good news is about. It is not idealism, naive or fantastic. These are simply the miracles that God's Word accomplishes when it is spoken. These are things that we cannot accomplish on our own; we cannot plan them, we can barely dream them on our best days. But they can and do happen, and when they do the world has a chance once more at peace, and human life has the chance of light. If, miracle of miracles, we listen to that Word, and if we follow it where it leads, then the miraculous will happen over and over again.