

“The Second Chance God” **Jonah 3: 1-5, 10**

The Old Testament book of Jonah has to be one of the best stories in the Bible. If you grew up going to Sunday school, you probably had child-like fascination at the idea of a giant fish swallowing Jonah and him dwelling inside the fish’s belly for 3 days. However, Jonah is more than just a fish tale. It is more than simply a story that begs the question of either the empirical or historical possibility that it really happened. If that is what you focus on with the story of Jonah, you miss the point. The point of Jonah is the mercy and grace of God; a point we so often times miss in the Old Testament.

Anyone who still holds the old stereotypical opinion that the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and judgmental, in contrast to the God of the New, who is loving and merciful, should carefully study the book of Jonah. Above all else, Jonah is about the mercy and love of God. (*Roger E. Van Horn, The Lectionary Commentary: The First Readings, p.484*)

To capture the real point of Jonah, you have to have a sense of the whole book. We have only read a small portion from the middle of the book, so let’s take a moment to hear once again the whole story of Jonah leading up to our passage today.

The story begins with Jonah, the son of Ammitai receiving a call from the Lord. “The word of the Lord, came to Jonah,” reads chapter one, verse one. And that call, that “word of the Lord,” beckons Jonah to go at once to Nineveh and cry out against that great city’s wickedness. From there the story shifts almost toward the comedic.

God tells Jonah to travel 500 miles east to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and what does Jonah do? Jonah heads about as far west as one could go! He sets out to flee to Tarshish, which was on the southern tip of Spain! Jonah wants nothing to do with this call from God!

And who could blame him. What God asked him to do was the height of unpleasantness. You see, Jonah is an Israelite. And the Lord has asked Jonah to go and preach the judgment of God to his and his people’s mortal enemies! Assyria was the nation that had brutally conquered the Israelites in 721. It was not enough for the Assyrians to simply win the war of nations. No, they were brutal toward their enemies. They deported the inhabitants of the peoples they conquered, that is, those they managed not to slaughter. They pillaged and looted and confiscated property. One writer calls the Assyrians the Nazis of their era. They represented all that was evil and unjust in a nation. And so when the call of God comes to Jonah to go one way, he high-tails it in the opposite direction. Can you blame him?

Nineveh was situated where the modern day city of Mosul is in northern Iraq. How would you feel about walking up and down the streets of Mosul telling the people how evil they were and to get right with God? Well, that’s how Jonah felt. When God said go east, Jonah said “I think I’ll go west. And with apologies to Three Dog Night, Jonah said, “Well, I’ve never been to Spain, but I kinda like the music!”

Jonah is able to book passage on a vessel out of Joppa. All the sailors on the boat are a bunch of pagans, but at least they’re not Ninevites. Well, after getting several days out to sea, a tremendous storm comes up. The crew is all in fear for their lives. So they start praying to their gods. Yet the storm persists. All the while, Jonah is down in the cargo hold sleeping through the storm. The

sailors got and rouse Jonah from slumber and tell him to pray to his God. In the process they find out that Jonah is fleeing from his God and tells the men that their only hope is to throw him overboard. Reluctant to do this, the sailors try rowing against the storm, only to realize it is futile. So they do indeed throw Jonah over the side of the ship. And suddenly the gale subsides. The pagans are so amazed at Jonah's God, the God of earth and sky and sea, that they convert right on the spot.

But what becomes of Jonah? Well, this is where Jonah gets swallowed by the great fish. For the next three days, Jonah stews in the digestive juices of the fish, ironically and alternately praising God for saving him from the storm and blaming God for his dilemma. After 72 hours the fish had just about stomachached all he could of this acerbic fellow named Jonah, so he up-chucks him on the beach. And that is where our scripture picks up today with, in my humble opinion, what may be the best line in the book.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message that I tell you'" (3:1-2)

Amazing: the word of the Lord came to Jonah **a second time!** This is the first note sounded about the grace and mercy of God in this wonderful story. Jonah, the reluctant prophet, the recalcitrant believer, is not given up on by God! He is given a second opportunity to answer the Lord's call, because truth be told, the Lord Jonah worships is the God of the second chance.

And that is the great and good news – the gospel if you will – in this Old Testament story. God does not give up in those whom God calls to be his people and carry out his mission. Even people like Jonah, even people like me and you who run as fast as we can to try to avoid God; the Lord gives a second chance. I like the way one writer puts it:

"God sticks with those with whom he is stuck!"

(Richard Boyce in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., p.271)

Whether it's Israel, or the Church; whether it's Jonah or Ted; God sticks with us because God has decided that He is stuck with us! Thanks be to God.

And I dare say, there is a Jonah in each and every one of us. If you have ever thought you could avoid doing the right thing; ever thought you could get away from the all-seeing eye of the Lord; run from God, then there is a little bit of Jonah in you. But praise God, that He is a God of the second chance! He comes to us again, calling us, entrusting less-than-faithful people like you and me and Jonah to do what he says to do with our lives.

Well, Jonah decides that he can't escape God, so he goes to Nineveh and walks from one end of the city to the other. But even as he does, Jonah comes off as about the sorriest excuse for a prophet in the whole Old Testament! Jonah's whole sermon amounts to one sentence that doesn't even mention God:

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

In the original Hebrew its only 5 words! ("Yoth arbayim yom nuninwe nehpaketh"). But here's the real kicker: his wimpy sermon worked better than a Billy Graham stem-winder! The Bible says the people believed God! And they all repented - all 120,000 of them. That's 24,000 for every word of

Jonah's sermon! They all put on sackcloth and ashes – even the king! And they repented of their evil. They changed through a 5 word sermon by a stubborn old goat named Jonah!

And by the way, that is another note of grace and mercy in this book – God can use even the least capable, the least eloquent, the least gifted, the weakest and the poorest to accomplish his work. There is no one that God cannot use, if we will make ourselves available rather than turning tail and running the other way when God calls.

Yes, the people change! And as a result, God changes his plan for this great city. He does not execute judgment, but gives *them* a second chance, just like he did old Jonah. And that is where our scripture text today ends.

However, that's not where the story of Jonah ends. The first verse of chapter 4 – the verse which follows this change in God to give the Ninevites a second chance – says this:

“But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.”

Now, that's how it reads in the NRSV, but that translation kind of soft-pedals the original Hebrew. In the Hebrew, as best I can translate it, it reads:

“It was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned.”

(See a commentary by Beth Tanner at www.workingpreacher.org)

It just “fried old Jonah's hide” that God would relent from his wrath toward these sorry Assyrians! Jonah is hoping mad – so mad that he decides he will just go and sit down under a castor bean tree and die. You can just hear him – “Just kill me now, if that's the way you're gonna be, Lord!” You see, that's why Jonah didn't want this job in the first place. In fact he even says so to God:

“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.”

You see, even before running away, Jonah knew that the Lord was the God of the second chance. And while Jonah liked this attribute of the Lord's character for himself, it burned him up that the Lord was willing and able to be the second-chance God for his enemies. Therein lies the rub.

A short play written in 1947 by Robert Frost entitled *The Masque of Mercy*, is a retelling of the biblical story of Jonah. In the play the figure of Jonah repeatedly laments,

“I can't trust God to be unmerciful.”

You have to unravel the double negative in Frost's artful writing here, but you get the message: God cannot be trusted to join us in the hatred of our enemies. (Joel Whiteside at www.goodpreacher.com, “*Lessons and the Arts II*”)

Because God cannot be trusted to hate the Ninevites as Jonah despised them, Jonah goes off and pouts. He sits there under his castor bean bush sulking. Well, God is not done with Jonah. God causes the bush to wither and die. And that makes Jonah even angrier because now he has no shade. But as he sits there sweating and sulking, the second-chance God comes to Jonah for a third time:

“Is it right for you to be angry about the bush? And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’¹⁰ Then the LORD said, ‘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.’¹¹ 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 their left, and also many animals?’

And that is where the story ends. It is the only book of the Bible that ends with a question. And because it ends with a question – not answered by Jonah – from a literary standpoint it means that *we, the readers must answer the question.*

Should not God who gives me a second chance, who is “gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing” (4:2), should not He also be allowed to be forbearing even to those whom we deem unworthy of divine charity? God’s question to Jonah is basically this: Do you want me to be a different God that I am?

The Apostle Peter – who had a divine revelation in Joppa, that same seaport from which Jonah fled from God, a revelation that God is the Creator of all people not just “my” people - wrote these words to the earliest Christians:

The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. (2 Peter 3:9) NLT

The God of the second chance saves the most unlikely people – the Ninevites, a thief beside him on the cross, a bunch of deserting disciples, a Saul who persecuted Christians, and yes, incredibly, even you and me. (*Elizabeth Achtemeier in The Lectionary Commentary, p.487*)

To the God of the second-chance be honor and glory. Amen.

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