

Sermon on Jonah for Epiphany 3, Jan. 21, 2024

Today we have a small snippet from the story of Jonah. Let's look at the whole thing. It's a great story. It was probably written after Israel and Judah had been carried away into captivity and were starting to understand that God was not just their God, but everyone's God, but it's set about 200 years earlier, in the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel, when the prophet Jonah actually lived, and when Israel had been fighting Assyria for 100 years.

So the word of the Lord comes to the prophet Jonah saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that Great City, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria, the enemy. God is telling Jonah to go and warn the enemy that God is mad at them and if they don't smarten up, they will be destroyed.

So Jonah runs away. He decides to run away to Tarshish, which is probably Spain, as far away as he can get. Because he doesn't want to go and warn the enemy of their impending doom. He wants God to destroy them. Nothing would make him happier than to see God smite Nineveh and destroy it. And he's very much afraid, he tells us later, that if he does go and preach to them, they might repent and then God, that gracious and loving and merciful God, might spare them. So he runs.

He gets on a ship and they head off to Tarshish. Only God doesn't give up that easily. He sends a storm with terrible winds. The sailors do all they can: they lighten the load by throwing the cargo overboard, they pray to their gods. And nothing helps. So the captain goes and wakes Jonah up – he's sleeping in the hold – and tells him to pray, because maybe his god will do something before they all drown.

They decide that one of the gods must be mad at someone on board and they cast lots to figure out who and it falls on Jonah. He says he serves the Lord, who made heaven and earth and the sea. Well, he doesn't serve him very well, truth to tell. But that's what he says, and he says God is mad at him. He says to them, "The only way the storm will die down will be if you throw me overboard." Get this. He would rather die than go warn Nineveh of its doom. Because it would probably have died down if Jonah had repented and said he would go. But no. He'd rather die than help the enemy.

The sailors, being decent people, don't want to throw him overboard, but finally they have no choice, so they do. Only once again God thwarts Jonah's plan and he sends a fish to swallow him up. It takes 3 days in the belly of the fish before Jonah repents. He prays thanking God for saving his life and he says he would like to worship God again in his temple. He has given in. And God has the fish spit him out and off he goes to Nineveh.

He walks into the middle of the city and starts proclaiming, "You've got 40 days before Nineveh is overthrown." Not a lot of details, no alternatives offered. It's a pretty pared down, half-hearted message, but all the people of Nineveh, possibly alarmed by the odd appearance of this bedraggled prophet who has spent 3 days in a fish belly, repent. From the King down to the youngest baby and all the animals, everyone puts on sackcloth and fasts and prays for God to relent. And God, quite predictably, does relent.

And Jonah is right ticked off. He goes out onto a nearby hill to sulk and he keeps hoping he might still see the downfall of his enemies. And he is really angry with God. So God sends a vine to grow up quickly and provide shade for him, and he feels some relief and maybe gratitude. Then the next day the vine dies, and Jonah is in a tantrum again. He tells God he's angry enough to die! And God gently asks him, "You're so worried about this vine, that you didn't plant, that you didn't tend, that grew up in a day and withered in a day. Shouldn't I be concerned about the people of Nineveh, 120,000 people, and also animals?"

The Bible doesn't give us Jonah's answer. It leaves an open question for us to answer. And how do we answer it? The Bible is pretty clear that God loves everyone. Not just the people we love. Not just the people that are on our side, or in our group. God loves everyone and Jesus tells us to love them. Can we see that God is right to love them all? Not just theoretical other people, but actual other people, with names, who are maybe doing bad things? Can we agree that God is right to love them? Or not?

You know, God is always calling us to do things we have no desire to do. Have you noticed that? You don't have to read far in the gospels or the Old Testament to find God telling us to do something we don't want to do. Love our enemies. Love our neighbours, even. Help the poor and destitute and immigrants, even if they've made bad choices. Forgive people who hurt us. Treat other people the way we'd like to be treated, even if they don't deserve it. Share our goods. Share our faith. Tell people the good news about Jesus. How many of these things do we truly want to do?

And you know, when God calls us to do something we don't want to do, like Jonah, God may well be doing that partly for the benefit of the group he wants us to help, like the Ninevites. But it's also for our own well-being and growth. Did you notice that in this story, every person Jonah meets, and they're all pagans, is more righteous than he is? The sailors are more pious, praying while Jonah sleeps. They don't want to kill him. When they see the storm stops, they immediately start worshipping Jonah's God. The Ninevites repent wholeheartedly, as soon as they hear Jonah's really half-hearted prophecy. Every one of these people is more pious and more decent than Jonah.

Jonah, on the other hand, is a sulky, disobedient, reluctant, cranky man who would rather exile himself or even die than help someone he doesn't like. And God patiently works with him. He calls him to do something that will take him out of himself. When Jonah runs away, God sends the wind against them, but he doesn't hurt anyone with it. When Jonah chooses death over repentance, he sends a fish to keep him safe for a bit till he changes his mind. And when Jonah has a fit of sulks outside Nineveh, God patiently tries to explain in a way he can understand. We aren't told if Jonah is transformed or if he keeps on being the way he was. Some people are just really hard to work on, even for God. But God doesn't give up on us, even when we're like Jonah.

When God calls us to help someone, chances are really good it's in large part for our own benefit, for our own growth. Because it is only by doing that, or something like that, that we can take the next step in our own spiritual growth. When God called me to the

priesthood, I might have thought at the time that it was because I had a lot of gifts God could use to help people. I'm going to tell you, that wasn't the main reason.

I believe the main reason was that I was in a rut, or a spiritual plateau, and I needed to grow and God saw this as a way that I could grow into a better person, into the person God wanted me to be. God saw this as a way for me to fulfill some of the potential I'd been neglecting and get rid of some stuff that was holding me back. I wasn't quite as cranky about it as Jonah, most of the time. There were days, though. Have I been able to help other people? Sure. But not nearly as much as doing it has helped me.

So here's a question for us: what is God calling us to do that we're resisting right now? Not necessarily what other people are calling us to, though God does speak through other people sometimes, but God. Take counsel with yourselves and ask God to show you what you are being called to, right now. It might be to step out in faith and do something new. It might be to teach someone else to do what you have been doing so you can step back. It might be loving someone or forgiving someone that you would much rather see God smite, or smite yourself. It might be getting to know someone you've regarded as "the stranger," and learning to see their humanity and goodness, as Jonah was forced to do with the Ninevites. Or it might be something quite different. Think about it. Pray about it. Ask God to show you.

I was talking to an old friend and colleague this week, whom I haven't seen in 20 odd years. He was telling me about a time he was discerning God's call, and he said to God, "Remember, I need a two by four to convince me. Show me. I want to know." He got his 2X4 and he did the thing he was stalling on. That he didn't really want to do. It took me months to figure out I was called to the priesthood, after I started praying even, and this same friend said to me, "What took you so long? Why didn't you do it years earlier? We all saw that in you." Well, what indeed? What does take us so long?

That's the next question to consider. Why are we resisting this calling? Whatever it is. Why don't we want to do it? Lots of reason there might be. But offer those to God as well. Ask for help. You don't want God to have to resort to extreme measures! Though I don't think God routinely has people swallowed by fish to bring them to their senses!

And as a church, what is God calling us to do that we don't want to do? Churches, like individuals, tend to resist God's calling when it is to something new and challenging and maybe scary. Things that require us to give up a sense of certainty and control and predictability. God has been stirring up our church lately, sending us new members, younger members, members who didn't grow up in old Spryfield. God is shaking us up. Whenever the Spirit is moving like this, it's a sign that God is calling us to growth, and maybe to some new kinds of growth. And not just for the benefit of others, but primarily for our own benefit, so we can take the next steps of growing into the full stature of Christ.

As a church, we can also pray for guidance and direction: "What are you calling us to, God? Why are we resisting? Help us to see these things and to repent and follow you." Like Jonah, even if it's half-hearted. Like Peter, Andrew, James and John, in today's gospel,

even if they didn't know what they were getting into. As Jesus called to the people, "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news." The Kingdom of God is still at hand. Let us open our hearts and minds to the moving of God's Spirit, believe in the Good News, and follow wherever we are being called. We won't regret it.