

“Who’s your Nineveh?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
January 21, 2018 Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Jonah 3:1-5,10 and Mark 1:14-20

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

Why does the scripture I just read say: **Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time?** This Old Testament reading from Jonah leaves out quite a bit of the story. Let’s fill in what was left out.

When Jonah first received God’s call to go to Nineveh, he disobeyed God’s direction and got on the first ship heading in the opposite direction of Nineveh. What happens to Jonah while he’s on the ship? A storm came up and he’s thrown into the sea to calm the storm. What’s so interesting about this part of the story is that the pagan sailors turned to Jonah’s God, the God of the Hebrews, in contrast to Jonah who is running away from God.

Chapter 1: 14-16: **Then they (the sailors) called on the Lord and said, “We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased.” 15 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.**

Jonah is thrown into the sea and what happens next? He’s swallowed by a great fish. Inside the fish he prays to God for forgiveness and the fish vomits Jonah out onto dry land. I love Gary Larson’s interpretation of this event. Mrs. Jonah says, “For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slim, and smelling like a fish! And what story do I have to swallow this time?”

Now that Jonah’s on dry land, we pick up the story in today’s scripture reading. Jonah does what God originally tells him to do and the people of Nineveh repent, and God does not destroy Nineveh.

What happens after that? This part of the story is often forgotten. Jonah is mad at God.

Chapter 4:1-4: **“Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this, I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” 4 The Lord said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”**

Why was Jonah angry at God? God has just saved the enemy of the Hebrew people.

Let's step back a moment. When God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah could not believe what he heard. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that had conquered the Hebrew people. The Assyrians were a brutal occupying force. God was directing Jonah to go into the lion's den. His life would be in danger. The chance of instant death was quite real. He could be killed at any moment if he set foot in the city.

Today, God's request would be equivalent to asking you to go to a city controlled by ISIS in Iraq. I think that many of us would want to get in a boat and head the other direction if God asked us to go to Iraq.

But after a bit of 'gentle' persuasion, Jonah goes to Nineveh.

What happened there is nothing short of a miracle. Jonah gives the shortest and perhaps the least forceful prophecy recorded in the Bible. **"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**

What happens? The whole city repents. In what is probably an overstated description of the people's response to Jonah's prophecy, the whole city repents and puts on sackcloth, including the animals, and doesn't eat or drink in hopes that God will not destroy the city.

Jonah is probably the most successful prophet in the Old Testament. Over 120,000 people change their way. A whole city turns to God. Jonah should be rejoicing. Is he? No, Jonah isn't happy. He's mad at God for saving the Hebrew people's enemy.

(PAUSE)

The tale of Jonah and the whale is a story with layers of meaning. It's a story that appeals to children. It's one of those children's Bible stories we all learned in Sunday School. Children often remember the truth of the story very differently than adults.

A Sunday school teacher had been telling her class the story of Jonah and the whale. Finally, she asked them what lesson they thought the story taught. One little boy put up his hand. "I know, Miss!" he said. "It teaches that you can't keep a good man down!"

Well, Jonah did get up and go to Nineveh.

Beyond the children's level of the story, Jonah's adventure is exaggerated and, at times, humorous. But it's supposed to be. We can compare Jonah's story to Aesop's fables. Jonah is a moral story, a story with a message for us.

On one level, we can look at today's reading from Jonah as saying we should follow God no questions asked. If we look at today's reading from the Gospel of Mark we could come to the same conclusion. We see the disciples drop everything and follow Jesus. Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew, James and John dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus. Unlike, Jonah, we don't read of the disciples complaining at following Jesus. Are we to do the same? Can we do the same?

When we look a little closer, we find that the disciples may have said they would follow Jesus, but they didn't necessarily do a good job of following. Peter was rebuked by Jesus for wanting to keep Jesus from following God's will that Jesus would die. James, John, and Peter fall asleep when Jesus needed them most to pray for him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times.

Jonah, James, John, Andrew and Peter messed up but were all given second chances. The lesson in Jonah is that we should follow God where God directs us. But like the disciples and Jonah, we do make mistakes. We don't always do God's will. But the God that Jonah describes as **a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness** forgives us and uses us for God's purposes even when we make mistakes. God is indeed a God of second chances.

On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that game, a man named Roy Riggles recovered a fumble for UCLA. Somehow, Riggles became confused and ran 65 yards in the wrong direction. One of his teammates outdistanced him and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team.

That strange play came in the first half, and everyone watching the game was asking the same question: "What will the UCLA coach do with Roy Riggles in the second half?" The players went into the dressing room. Riggles put his blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, put his face in his hands and cried like a baby.

A coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime, but that day, this coach was quiet. When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were only three minutes till play time. The coach announced, "Men, the same team that played the first half, will start the second."

The players got up and started out - all but Riggles. The coach said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half, will start the second." "Coach," Riggles said, "I can't do it to save my life. I've ruined you. I've ruined the University of California. I've ruined myself. I couldn't face that crowd in the stadium to save my life."

Then the coach said, "Roy, get up and go on back. The game is only half over." Riggles went back, and those Georgia Tech players will tell you they have never seen a man play football as Roy Riggles played in that second half.

No matter how badly we fumble, how hard we fall, how long we falter, how horrible our failure, God comes to us and says to us, "Get up. Go on back. The game is only half over." God is a God of second chances.

(PAUSE)

There's a second lesson for us in the story of Jonah. I remarked earlier that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a country that had conquered the Hebrew people. Assyria was the enemy of Israel. Yet, God sent Jonah off to save the enemy from certain destruction. Jonah wasn't happy with the assignment. He hated the Assyrians and those 120,000 people who lived in its capital, Nineveh.

The story of Jonah reveals to us a God that loves all people. God's mercy is for more than one group of people, even people we don't think deserve God's mercy. God has the ability to do the incomprehensible, to extend mercy to those we feel are least deserving of God's mercy.

Jesus makes this same point: love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you. It may be difficult at times to accept God's goodness. Jonah certainly had a difficult time accepting God's goodness and mercy for the people of Nineveh! But God is good all the time and God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

The author of one of the commentaries I consulted said her father always said that if we did not believe that God would save the most foul of humans, then we don't really believe in God's power to save our own soul. (Working Preacher, Beth Tanner, 20019). God's grace and mercy are indeed our hope and salvation.

None of us follows without falling. We don't seem to be able to avoid saying who should and who should not have God's mercy. We question who deserves God's mercy. Like Jonah, we complain. We try to negotiate and bargain with God. Yet we serve a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Because of that, we know that God will not abandon us, but will meet us where we are and forgive and redeem us – and we don't have to spend 3 days in the belly of a big fish.

That is indeed good news!