

9 February 2020

Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5, 10; 4:1-11

The Ways of God
First Mennonite
Church



When I say “Jonah,” I imagine most of us immediately think of a children's story complete with a whale. But, the story of Jonah is more than just a big whale tale. It is a humorous story, filled with irony and exaggeration—an adult story where we are given an opportunity to stretch our understanding of God and salvation.

In this book, Jonah was called by God to *“Arise, go to Nineveh and cry out against it. Tell them their wickedness has come before me.”*

What did Jonah do? Jonah was no Peter, Andrew, James, or John. He didn't leave what he was doing and immediately follow God's call. Instead, he jumped on the first boat going in the opposite direction and hid in the hold of the ship, hoping that somehow God wouldn't take notice. It was as if Peter, Andrew, James, and John, upon

encountering Jesus, jumped into their fishing boats and rowed like crazy for the opposite shore, as far away from Jesus as they could get.

God told Jonah to go this way. Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Why? Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah as a vassal for almost one hundred years. Assyria was more than an enemy; it was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fortunes. Jonah was called by God to go and prophesy to the enemy.



Years ago, my family was really into the Canadian television sitcom, Corner Gas. I absolutely loved the quirky characters and the small-town humour, because it reminded me of growing up in Winkler MB. For example, the people of Dog River had a pathological dislike of the residents of Wullerton, a neighboring town, to the point that they spit on the ground whenever the rival town was mentioned.

This reminded me of Winkler, and how Winkler folks disliked Steinbach for the simple reason captured in an old Low German phrase: “they were from Yant Zeid”. They were from the other side of the river.

To an Israelite like Jonah, being told to go to Nineveh would be more like telling a person from the US to “Go to Osama Bin Laden's compound.”

Nineveh. The very name brought fear and revulsion to the ancient Hebrew heart. Capital of the dreaded world power, Assyria, Nineveh personified all that was evil: Opposition to Yahweh, a military threat to Israel, a reputation for sin, cruelty and ruthless power.

Jonah could not believe that God wants him to go preach there. They deserve no mission of mercy. When God says go this way, Jonah goes the other way. And that's where the whale comes in. As he runs from God, Jonah tries to sail far away from Nineveh. Eventually he's tossed overboard and swallowed by the fish.

Christians over the years have angrily argued with each other over this part of the story. Some say whales can't swallow people, while others say: “Well, the Bible says it

happened, so it must have happened!” It's unfortunate that people have gotten so hung up on this whale. First of all, it's not a whale but a really great fish. The Hebrew text of Jonah reads dag gadol (Hebrew: דג גדול), which literally means “**great fish**”. Second, Christians have argued about the species of the fish, its size, have debated how Jonah could have possibly survived in the belly of the fish for three days, and pondered why Jonah wasn't digested! Christians have condemned others over differing fish interpretations, but in doing so have missed the point of the story.

I want to suggest to you this morning, that the point the Jonah story is not the chemical composition of the digestive juices in the belly of the fish. **The point of the story is to tell us something important about God—what God is like and who God is.**



After three days of being inside the fish, Jonah is spat safely onto the shore which goes to show, “**You can't keep a good man down!**”

Jonah hadn't really repented. He certainly **WAS NOT** keen about God's plan even after God gave him a second chance. What's often missed in the story is how little change there was in this newly regurgitated

prophet. The fish has changed his destination, but not his disposition, his geography but not his theology.

Jonah went to Nineveh to preach God's message, not happily, but grudgingly, not hoping Nineveh would repent and be saved, but hoping they wouldn't. He planned 40 days of revival meetings, his first sermon being the wimpiest ever recorded. *“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*

After Jonah preached his lacklustre and pathetic sermon, he didn't wait around for an altar call, nor did he wait for the choir to sing even sing one verse of “Just As I Am without one plea”. He laid the word on them, cleared out of town, sat on a nearby hill and waited for what he hoped would soon begin—God's fireworks on that hated people.

What happened? The unexpected happened. Repentance happened. Much to Jonah's dismay. All over the city of Nineveh the miracle of **turning** happened, from the king to the cattle. Everyone put on sackcloth and ashes, "from the greatest to the least."

Then the remarkable verse:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God repented of the evil which he said he would do. God did not do it.

God repented because they repented. God changed God's mind because they changed, they turned around their lives so they could live God's way.

Amazing! Too often we think of God as unchanging. We sing that wonderful hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness—Thou changest not...* But what is it about God that doesn't change? **Thy compassions, they fail not.** God's compassion never changes. God's mercy, love, willingness to forgive, willingness to give us second, third and fourth chances—these are the things that don't change.

In the book of Exodus it says, the Lord is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.* (Exodus 34:6-7a)

But, this didn't mean that God was Israel's possession, that God was merely Israel's puppet. No. The faith of Israel was rooted in a **God who was free**, free to save Israel from bondage in Egypt, free to send them into exile when they failed to keep their covenant promises, free to welcome and be hospitable to Ninevites, even if they were enemies of Israel, free to appoint the Persian king, Cyrus, to be God's servant, free to come to us in the form of a baby, live like us, and even die like us, and free to save and restore this broken world.

The faith of Israel assumed that God was transcendent and not bound by human limitations. Though they named God, Israel was aware that God was beyond speech, and were even reluctant to speak God's name. Stories, metaphors, and various substitute names were used instead to describe their relationship with God while still preserving the sense of holiness and transcendence. For instance, faithful Jews never wrote the full name of God down. Instead of writing, **Yahweh**, which was how God was pronounced in Hebrew, they wrote only **YHWH**. They never used vowels; only consonants. For faithful Jews, writing the name of God meant reducing God down to something understandable, an idol that can be manipulated and controlled.

Today, there are Christians who don't write the word "God" for the same reason. They drop the consonant, and write only **G-d**. They do this as a reminder that God is big, mysterious, and wholly other.



Anne Lamott, novelist and non-fiction writer from the US, once quoted a Catholic priest who said, **"You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people as you do."**

This was Jonah's problem. You see, Jonah hated the Ninevites, had no desire to have them become part of God's people. Jonah wanted his God to be like him: small, understood, flattened, reduced to his size.

But, in the back of his mind, Jonah realized that God was free, large, and mysterious. This is why he ran away when God first asked him to go to Nineveh.

We would do well to understand God in a kind of tension or even contradiction. On the one hand we do not understand God. On the other hand, God is truly knowable because we have seen God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. On the one hand, God is large, mysterious, incomprehensible, and on the other, through revelation, truly knowable.

Israel's temptation was to be like God, to define God's likes, dislikes, wants, and desires according to their likes and dislikes, wants and desires. This is our temptation as well. Jonah would have been thrilled if God had rained fire and brimstone upon Nineveh, because Jonah hated the Ninevites. But God had other ideas. God intended to give the people of Nineveh another chance. God wanted them to change their ways so that they could live and be renewed.

Of course, the exaggerated response of the people and the animals is hilarious. Can you imagine every living thing in the city, including every cow, chicken, duck, and cat fasting and covered with sackcloth and ashes? Jonah should have been ecstatic! With a few words, the whole nation turned to God. Jonah should have been put in the evangelism hall of fame.

The point of the story is not about the conversion of an entire enemy population. It is about Jonah's reaction to that amazing conversion. He is not happy, and the reason is because God is being consistent to God's own self. The NRSV, the version of the Bible we use for our public scripture reading really tones down Jonah's anger with the words *"this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry"* (4:1). The Hebrew reads roughly, "it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned."

The "it" of Jonah's anger is the heart of the matter. He tells God why he ran, *"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"* (4:2). Jonah is angry at God for the very attributes that Israel has always depended on for its own salvation (Exodus 34:6-7)!

It raises a question for me: How willing are we to let God be God? Salvation is pure gift and grace, and Jonah's story reminds us that we do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish. God will be forgiving to whomever because that is the very heart of God. Our task and responsibility as a community is to welcome and be hospitable to whomever walks into our midst as God is to us.

The story of Jonah is much more than a whale tale. Its message is meant for those mature enough to understand **the ways of God**, and to face the ways we try to lay claim to God and God's gift of grace.

There is an old Dennis the Menace cartoon in which Dennis and his little friend, Joey, are seen leaving Mrs. Wilson's house with their hands full of cookies. Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this?" "Look, Joey," Dennis replies. "Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice."

The same thing is true when it comes to God's grace and mercy. God shows us mercy and grace, not because we deserve it, but because God is merciful and gracious. Amen