

“The Repentance of God”
September 4, 2022

Jonah 3-4

As we read through the Minor Prophets, there has been at least one unfamiliar face so far. Many have heard of Hosea or Joel or Amos. But last Sunday’s prophet, Obadiah? He was new to many.

Today we return to the familiar: Jonah. If you know nothing else about Jonah, God’s reluctant prophet, I’m willing to guess that you know he was swallowed by a—well not a whale, but—by a *really* large fish. And we’ll come back to that.

Most people who know more about Jonah find him a fairly disagreeable person—somewhat petty, a little too self righteous.

This morning we heard that part of Jonah’s story that usually isn’t taught in Sunday School. God tells Jonah—*for a second time*—to go to Nineveh. The recalcitrant prophet meets the God of second chances.

Sometime earlier, God first told Jonah to go to Nineveh, a great city in the Assyrian Empire—in what is today Iraq. Jonah was to warn the people of this wicked city that God’s punishment was at hand.

So, Jonah, hearing the call of God,

Jonah, angry that God would show mercy on such people,

Jonah hops on a ship heading for Tarshish, in southern Spain, probably the farthest point away from Nineveh to which he could sail.

The trip, as you know, doesn’t go as planned. Running from God is like that.

Bad weather comes up. The sailors in the storm-tossed boat discover Jonah’s disobedience is the cause of their danger. At his suggestion, they throw Jonah overboard and then pray to his God as if their lives depended on it—and, really, their lives *did* depend on that.

Even if you know nothing else about this prophet, you know that he was promptly swallowed by a—well, as I said, not a whale, really, but as the Bible says—by a large fish. Astonishing, yes. But wait, because that’s not the truly amazing part of this story. Inside that fish for three days and three nights, Jonah prays to God. We read that prayer together this morning.

Now, prayer can be difficult in the best of circumstances. Stuck in the belly of a fish, prayer might be the last thing you’d think about—if it weren’t the first.

One thing is certain, however, for Jonah and for us. No matter how deep the fish dove and no matter how dark it was inside, no depth nor darkness is enough to drown out the sound of prayer.

So, Jonah can end his prayer ends with the affirmation: "Deliverance belongs to the LORD."

And apparently it does, because at that point, we are told, the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land—presumably as glad to be rid of disagreeable, recalcitrant Jonah as he was to be out of the fish.

If the story of Jonah were simply a cautionary tale about trying to run from God, perhaps we could learn the lesson: Refuse your calling and risk being thrown to the whales.

Jonah, however, is not about whales or fish. It is about repentance.

You see, that encounter with the fish isn't really the awful part of the story from Jonah's point of view.

What really upsets him is what those Ninevites do once Jonah finally gets to town.

You know, Nineveh really was an evil place. Another prophet, Nahum, whom we'll get to in a couple of weeks, called it a vile and bloody city. When Nineveh's end came, would anyone feel sorry?¹

Certainly not Jonah. And as far as he can tell, God won't have any regrets either

Nineveh was large as well as evil. It was so great in size that the narrator of the story—probably exaggerating a little, like with that fish story—says it took three days to walk across it. When Jonah finally appears on the scene, his heart still isn't in his work. He only begins to go into the city. And when he opens his mouth to give the people God's warning, well, he isn't very forceful.

“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That's all he says. Actually, in Hebrew, that message only took five words. It's as if Jonah stood in earshot of a few people, shrugged his shoulders and said: “In forty days you're goners.”

If nobody heard, if nobody listened, that would be all right with Jonah.

The half-hearted prophet finally visits the great city. Maybe you can understand his reluctance. Nineveh was evil. The people might have laughed at Jonah, or beaten him up for what he said, or just ignored him.

But the people of Nineveh do something else.

They repent!

Repentance comes upon even the worst of us. Somehow, often in spite of all the preaching and scolding, what can only be called the grace of God breaks in. We change our minds and head in a different direction. Like the people of Nineveh, we take a second chance.

I don't think it's because anyone actually believes *Jonah*. His words are unconvincing. The people of Nineveh believe *God*.

Through those weakly mumbled words, the Word of God somehow gets out. That, of course, is the only hope that those of us who preach have. We speak, but only God can make those words touch the hearts of those who hear.

Everyone repents—not just the people who happened to be nearby when Jonah spoke, but *everyone* right up to the king and his nobles—. They put on sackcloth, they fast, they don't even drink. And it isn't just the people. For good measure all of the animals of Nineveh are covered with sackcloth. What a sight! The cattle confess, the fowls fast, even the rabbits repent!

The king says “All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.” Everyone needs to turn—and apparently everyone does. In showing the power of a group of people to turn around, this story prevents our faith from succumbing to cynicism and despair about the world.

Perhaps if we stand up for what is right, entire communities can change.

Perhaps entire nations can change.

This city takes a second chance and discovers both forgiveness and a new hope that allows them to look ahead.

In a way that's what repentance is about. We cannot change the past, but through repentance each one of us is given the power to shape the future. Individuals and communities can, if they wish, foil destiny and celebrate free choice.

Repentance takes a chance on what might lie ahead, asking along with the king of Nineveh, “Who knows? God may relent and change God's mind.” There is nothing mechanistic here. Repentance doesn't automatically guarantee rescue. As we heard from the prophet Joel last month, turning in a new direction comes with a question—“Who knows?”

Nineveh looks toward the future and repents.

A big fish. An evil city changing its way. Amazing.

And yet, there is something even more astonishing in this story.

God repents—God! The mind of God is changed by the actions of sinful human beings.

An impassive God, a God unmoved by human action is foreign to the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Again and again, we encounter the God who changes plans for destruction because God's love for all the creation is far greater than God's anger.

When you think about it, this is far more astonishing than being swallowed by a great fish. And for many people today, harder to believe. God is willing to put the past behind and look toward the future.

Even God gets a second chance.

Elie Wiesel put it this way: “The lesson in Jonah is that nothing is written, nothing is sealed: God’s will itself may change. Even though punishment has been programmed it may be cancelled. Therein lies the beauty and grandeur of the Jewish tradition: Every human being is granted one more chance, one more opportunity to start life all over again. Just as God has the power to begin, we have the power to continue by beginning again—and again.”

It is not the sackcloth and ashes so much as what the people did that touches the loving heart of God.

And that, of course, is just what Jonah feared all along. He knew that God is always ready to change God’s mind and not carry out punishment.

The God that Jonah served so reluctantly is merciful. In Hebrew, the root of the word for mercy means “womb.” It speaks of the motherly love of God who cares for all her creation, including the people of Nineveh who, evil as they were, didn’t seem to know their right hand from their left and for the many animals there as well.

Nineveh the great city, greatly wicked, repents. We might expect that to happen.

But here’s the surprise: God, whose forgiving love is even greater, repents as well.

And then there’s Jonah.

He’s been through a lot—storm and fish and repentance. At the end of this story Jonah sits in the hot Middle Eastern sun. He is astonished that God actually would forgive. He is angry—angry enough to die.

Each individual, each age seems to identify unforgivable sins. The story of Jonah reminds us that there are no unforgivable sins. In mercy, God knows all and forgives all.

It is amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. But what strikes many as truly amazing is when the same grace is extended to others. Modern-day Jonahs find that too hard to take.

Fortunately, God has the last word—with Jonah and with us.

While Jonah sits outside Nineveh, stewing in anger because God can be so kind, a bush grows up and provides him with some shade. It is a small gesture from God, who still loves Jonah in spite of his recalcitrance.

But the next day, just to make a point, God has a worm attack the plant so that it dies. And so, Jonah sits with the sun beating down on him wishing he were dead not only because God loves the people that Jonah despises but also because that bush has been destroyed.

You know how it is. God rarely does anything directly. But when we look at our lives, certainly there are times when events help us to understand the unending passion that God has for all creation—even for us.

God reminds this angry prophet that Jonah didn't labor for the plant, he didn't help it grow. The bush showed up overnight and then was gone.

Shouldn't God be concerned about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred thousand persons who don't even know their right hand from their left, and also many animals—some no doubt still in sackcloth?

God's last word is a question that each one of us is called to answer: Should not God be concerned? Should not God be concerned about all those whom we consider unlovable?

Should not God be concerned about all those whom we consider enemies?

Should not God be concerned about all who hunger and thirst?

Poor old Jonah.

Maybe you are like a lot of other people who find him disagreeable—somewhat petty and a little too self-righteous. But don't scorn Jonah too much, lest you withhold from him the mercy he would withhold from others.

Who knows? The great city of Nineveh could repent.

Even God could repent and do something different.

An old Jewish legend says that when Jonah saw the mercy of God toward the repentant Nineveh, he sought divine forgiveness for his own flight. I like to think so. I like to think that even Jonah could discover the mercy of the God of second chances and turn in a new direction.

Because, who knows? If Jonah could, maybe, just maybe, we will too.

Who knows?

¹ Limburg *Hosea--Micah*, pg. 151.