

The Lesson of the Big Fish

Jonah 3;10-4:11

Psalm 145

Today we pick up the story of Jonah, God's reluctant prophet, after his ordeal at sea. In an attempt to flee God's call, Jonah got on a ship headed in the opposite direction of where God had directed him to go. The ensuing storm that threatened to sink the ship, caused Jonah to admit his sin, and he gave instructions for the crew to throw him overboard to save everyone else on the ship. God, in his mercy, sent a very large fish to swallow Jonah and keep him safe for three days before spitting him out on the shore. Once discharged from the belly of the fish, again, Jonah heard God telling him to go to Nineveh and this time he did.

I'd like to think that Jonah eagerly completed his assignment because he was so grateful to God for sparing his life. Unfortunately, I think Jonah went to Nineveh just to keep himself from getting into any more trouble with God, not because he wanted to do something good for God or the people of Nineveh. I think this is a reasonable assumption, given that Jonah really didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. That's why he boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. Even though he was a prophet, a man of God, he was actively disobeying God. To get Jonah's attention, God sent a great storm and a very large fish. As we read today's story, it would appear that Jonah missed the point of God's rescue in the form of the big fish.

God gave Jonah a second chance to do the right thing. Ours is a God of second chances, after all. The problem that arises in today's story is that Jonah didn't want to give the Ninevites a second chance.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Assyria was a nation that bullied the surrounding countries. They were also a nation that worshipped pagan gods. Jonah may have had first-hand experience with the cruelties of the Assyrians or maybe he had heard stories from his countrymen about the wars they had to fight against the Assyrians. As an Israelite, one of God's chosen people, Jonah knew and could accept that God would forgive him for being disobedient, as long as he asked forgiveness and was repentant about his disobedience. He knew the prayer he prayed in the belly of the fish had been found acceptable to God. But Jonah probably couldn't, or didn't want to, accept that the same God that heard his prayer from the belly of the fish and granted forgiveness, could possibly care about, let alone forgive, these foreigners!

Whatever the reasons were for his initial reluctance, Jonah finally did as God had commanded and went to Nineveh to tell the people to repent. Now we come to the part that I find amazing, these pagan people who did not know the one true God, actually listened to Jonah and as a nation repented and asked for God's forgiveness! WOW!

You would think that Jonah would be jumping for joy that God's message had been heard. And in a foreign land by people who practiced pagan religions at that! After all, in his home country, where God reigned supreme, there was a history of killing the prophets because the people didn't like what they had to say. Yet in Nineveh, the capital city of a foreign pagan nation, everyone from the king to the lowliest slave repented. Not only that, God kept his word to the Ninevites and canceled their punishment because they were willing to humble themselves before him.

Jonah, however, was not amused, happy, or otherwise in good spirits. He actually stomped out of town, sat down on the ground, and grumbled that he wanted to die!

Why? Because he didn't think it was fair that God forgave those people their sins. Didn't Jonah remember that just a short time ago God had forgiven him for his sin of disobedience? If he did, it didn't seem to make any difference. Jonah was mad and told God so:

Jonah 4:3 (NIV2011)

³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

The story of Jonah brings to mind a similar story from our modern era. The name Michael Vic is one familiar to many people in this area, not just to Eagles fans. Michael had a fair amount of celebrity in this area as an outstanding football player, but he also had a dark side to his life. He was arrested, tried, and convicted of animal cruelty for running a dog fighting operation. Despite having more money than most of us will ever see in our lifetime, Michael gave into evil desires, much as the people of Nineveh had done. Michael served time in prison for his crimes. When he was released from prison, he wanted to return to his career in professional football. There were many people, (I will admit I was among them), that thought he should not be allowed to return to the sport that had rewarded him so richly and that he had tainted by his off-the-field activities. Enter Philadelphia Eagles then-head coach, Andy Reid. Andy knew about second chances. His own two sons had gotten into trouble with the law. They, too, had gone to jail for their crimes. As a father, he knew what it meant to give a second chance to someone you care about. He thought Michael Vic deserved a second chance, too. To his credit, Michael Vic tried to make amends for the harm he had caused. In his return to Philadelphia, he worked hard to educate young people to not follow the road he had traveled before he went to prison.

God felt the people of Nineveh should have a second chance, too. Yes, they were terrible sinners, but they were still God's created people. And like Andy Reid's desire to give not only his own sons, but Michael Vic a second chance, God wanted to offer the Ninevites one more opportunity to turn their backs on the lives they had lived and to do the right thing. Jonah, however, had gone to Nineveh wanting to see God wipe out this nation of sinners. He had not been humbled enough by his stay in the belly of the big fish and was unwilling to trust God's judgment in the case of the Ninevites. Did it do Jonah any good to be angry about God's mercy? It certainly did not!

As Jonah sat sulking outside the city, God gave him another lesson about mercy and forgiveness by raising up a plant to give Jonah shade and comfort. Then when Jonah was feeling good about the plant, God sent a worm to kill the plant and a strong wind and hot sun to plague Jonah. Jonah mourned the passing of the plant. Jonah showed more compassion for the lost plant than for the lost people of the city of Nineveh! He was angry about something that would bring glory to God, the repentance of 120,000 people!

God even tried a different approach by mentioning all the livestock that had been spared as well. If Jonah couldn't rejoice over so many people saved, would he at least respond to the economic disaster that had been averted? No, Jonah was not to be comforted.

Todd Hobbie writes in his commentary on Jonah:

It never seemed to cross Jonah's mind that, though he had directly disobeyed God's command, God had pursued him with persistent love. At least the Ninevites had ignorance of God as an excuse. Unlike Jonah, they repented as

soon as the message he brought them from God was clear, while Jonah headed in the opposite direction from God's command.

It never seemed to cross Jonah's mind that if God were unforgiving, God would have let him drown in the storm. It never seemed to cross his mind that the pagans on the ship, in their attempts to save him from harm at all costs, were much more like God than he was. Unlike Blanche DuBois (the main character of Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*), Jonah did not know how much he had "depended on the kindness of strangers."

It never seemed to cross Jonah's mind that even the fish was more obedient to God than he was. At least the fish, when commanded by God to vomit up Jonah, did as it was told. The fish must have felt much better when he could finally throw up the sour, disobedient prophet.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 4:
Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

What does it say about Jonah, and perhaps us today, that the pagans, and even animals, in this story showed more caring and Christlike behaviors than the prophet himself? Knowing that our God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, do *we* resent it when he shows that love to others? Should *we* be angry about something that brings glory to God, like the repentance of the people of Nineveh? Of course not, yet we do just that when we are unwilling to give others a second chance. When someone who has done wrong turns themselves around and we still want to hold their past against them, just like Jonah did with the Ninevites, we are being disobedient to God. We may not be called to deliver God's prophetic message to sinners in a foreign land, but we are called daily to

deliver his Word to the people we encounter: people in our families, in our schools and places of employment, maybe even in our churches. Like Jonah, God reminds us that we are not to feel smug about ourselves. We, too, have been given second, third, and fourth chances by God. All of us have fallen short of the Glory of God. We who call ourselves his disciples and have been forgiven should forgive others with the measure of forgiveness we ourselves have received. And, unlike Jonah, we are to rejoice with the angels in heaven when sinners turn their lives around to live as children of God.

As we go through our day-to-day activities, we need to keep the lesson of Jonah and the Big Fish before us. Ask God to help us stay open to seeing others as God sees them and offering the forgiveness that God has for them. Remembering always that God's mercy, His all forgiving, all-encompassing mercy, includes everyone, even us.

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