

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 “An Unlikely Hero”

One of the things I appreciate most about the Bible is its variety of style. Someone once said, “The Bible isn’t God’s *book*, it’s God’s *library*.” You’ve got history, you’ve got poetry, you’ve got law, wisdom literature, letters to churches, mysteries, adventures, drama ... something for everyone. Not everyone sees it this way though. I knew a person once who would get all upset if I talked about the “stories of the Bible.” Even when I talked about children at vacation bible school learning “bible stories,” he would get all upset with me and say, “By calling them Bible *stories*, you’re suggesting that they didn’t happen exactly the way it’s written in God’s infallible verbally inspired word! Stories aren’t true, God’s word is.” To which I’d say, “So you don’t think the story of *The Little Engine Who Could* is true?” “Of course not. The train talks. Trains don’t talk, they’re machines.” “But do you think it’s true that people who work hard towards a goal and have a positive attitude are more likely to overcome obstacles than people who just give up when things get hard?” (See I knew I could appeal to his Protestant work ethic!) “Well of course that’s true!” “Well then, the story is true.” “No it isn’t! Trains don’t talk!” Today’s scripture is from one of those books in the Bible that folks often use as a test of faith to find out if someone is a true biblical literalist. “Do you believe that Jonah could live in the belly of a fish for three days?” If you answer, “yes,” you’re “in.” Therefore you are not a heretic in the eyes of the one who administered the test. If the answer is “no,” then you’re doomed for eternity because you don’t “believe in the Bible,” and you better repent, get right with Jesus and go to a “Bible believing church” before it’s too late.

I’m just going to tell you right off the bat that I believe the story of Jonah is true. (Hallelujah! Preach it!) That is, it’s true in the same way that *The Little Engine That Could* or *The Big Brag* is true. (I’ll be praying for your soul preacher!) As I have already mentioned, the Bible ... God’s library ... contains a huge variety of literature types, including history. But the story of Jonah is *not* history. It’s not even written like history ... it’s written like a *fable* – which is a fictional story that

contains divine truth. “The Devil is stoking the fires of hell just for you preacher!” Stay with me, okay? Was there a Prophet named Jonah? Yes. He’s briefly mentioned in the Book of 1 Kings. The historical Jonah is thought to have lived around 750 BCE. What we’re studying today was written after the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon. Most scholars think this was written around 450 BCE. And remember, when we number years, everything before the Common Era runs backwards. That means the author of the book of Jonah wrote this around 300 years after the Jonah in 1st Kings actually lived. So the Book of Jonah, I believe, is a short story using a historical figure from the past to illustrate a point for his readers. And honestly, it’s pretty funny too. Which would upset my friend because he didn’t think there was *anything funny* in or about the Bible! The Bible is serious business! After all, it was written for the sole purpose of showing us what awful people we are and how much we need Jesus to save us.

No, I don’t buy that. There are plenty of funny stories in the Bible. God has a sense of humor. I mean look at the platypus. Is it a duck? Is it a beaver? Is it even a mammal? It lays eggs! Mammals don’t lay eggs! God has a sense of humor. So the story starts out with God calling Jonah to go to Nineveh to urge the Ninevites to repent. Jonah has some problems with the Ninevites though. He thinks they’re uncivilized and he could care less if God destroys them. In fact, he kind of hopes God will take them out. But no ... God wants him to go talk to the Ninevites on God’s behalf. So Jonah does what any reluctant prophet would do ... he tries to run from God. So he goes over to the Port of Joppa and hops a ship to Tarshish. I mean clearly God, the creator of all things, isn’t going to find him in Tarshish, right? Good hiding place Jonah!

That plan doesn’t work out so well because God sends a storm to sink the ship. When the crew finds out that Jonah is running from God and thus responsible for their dilemma, they throw him overboard. The storm stops, and the non-Jewish sailors give thanks and glory to the God of Israel which means Jonah unwittingly converted these pagan sailors! See? This is funny stuff! So while Jonah is floating out there on the

ocean, God sends a big fish to swallow him. So there's Jonah in the belly of this fish grumbling and griping about his bad luck and then after three days, the fish spits him out on dry land.

So there he is on a beach all slimy and stinky, and askin, "Where am I?" Then God says, "Nineveh. You're in Nineveh. (Which by the way, has *no* ocean-front property!) Now get up and do what I asked you to do in the first place: Go to the Great City and call them to repentance." "Fine. Whatever." And it takes Jonah *three days* to walk to the Great City. Who knows, it might have only been a day and a half walk, but Jonah was probably dragging his feet the whole way. I can hear him grumbling -- "Alright ... God wants me to go to the Great City and tell them they'll be destroyed? That's *exactly* what I'm going to do. That's *all* I'm going to do." Finally he arrives. "Ahem. May I have your attention please? God told me to tell you that in forty days you'll be destroyed. There. That's all. Y'all have a nice day." Stomp-stomp-stomp away. "Hmmp ... I wouldn't want to be anywhere around here in 40 days. Those ratty barbarians are gonna have to get some asbestos robes for all the fire God's gonna rain down on them!"

But then the unexpected happens. The word of Jonah's prophesy gets to the king, and he orders everyone - *even the animals* - to fast, dress in sackcloth and cry out to God for help. Can you picture a herd of little goats in sackcloth? I can. It's its *funny*! Maybe if they give up their evil barbaric ways, God will re-think things. And you know what? God heard their prayers of repentance and *didn't* destroy them.

It would be an understatement to say that Jonah was not pleased. Now the people of Nineveh were happy. But Jonah was mad. Mad to the point where he started yelling at God. "I knew this was going to happen! This is why I ran to Tarshish in the first place! I *knew* these barbarians would repent. And you're so darned gracious and merciful that *of course* you'd never go through with destroying them! Couldn't you just at least give them a really hot week or something? Jack up the humidity just to make them miserable? No. Of course you wouldn't do

that. You're all, "Merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." What is it with you? You lay out a plan for punishment and it ends up being a program for forgiveness. Gah!! You know what God? If you're not going to kill them, then just kill me instead. Because if you're gonna let a bunch of debaucherous barbarians like those Ninevites sit at your table, then I'd just rather be *dead!* Scratch out "Nivevites" and fill in whoever you don't think God likes if you want to get a handle on what Jonah was feeling.

Now God could have ignored Jonah. But instead, God asks him why he's so angry. "What's up lil' camper? Why so sore?" But rather than taking the opportunity to talk with God about his anger, Jonah stomps off out of the city, makes himself a scraggly little shelter out of leafy branches, sits down, and has a good sulk. Now ... God could have let Jonah sit out there and sulk. But Jonah was worth God's efforts ... just as much as the Ninevites were too. So God causes a broad-leafed tree to pop up and cool Jonah down from his angry little tantrum. Jonah thinks, "Wow, this is nice" and enjoys the shade. "Life is looking up." But are the hijinks in this hilarious little story over? No way! Because then God sends a worm to bore through the tree so it withers away. *Then* God turns up the temperature. But not on the Great City. He turns it up on *Jonah*. And Jonah once again says, "God, would you just let me die already!" But God says to Jonah, "Why are you so angry about this shade tree?" "Because that shade tree that *you* sent has made me so angry I want to die!" Right. She *shade tree* "made" Jonah angry. God says, "Well, how come you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger in just one night over a tree that you didn't even plant or care for? And yet when I change my feelings about Nineveh, filled with 20,000 people who I *have* planted and cared for, you get mad at me?"

And thus ends the story of Jonah. A story that is every bit as ironic, funny, and biologically and geographically impossible as *The Big Brag* or *The Little Engine That Could*. And yet the divine truth that this story reveals is that God is gracious, merciful, faithful, consistent, all-loving, all-forgiving -- and has a great sense of humor. Jonah ... this unlikely

hero, who I picture being played by Peter Sellers or Will Ferrell ... just sort of bumbles along doing great things without even really being aware of the good things that are happening around him. He's trying to run away from God and ends up bringing the crew of a ship and a whole city of Nivevites into relationship with God. See, Jonah expects to be loved because he's a letter-of-the-law abiding child of Israel ... a professional prophet ... God's ambassador to the Israelites. And yet, on this quirky little adventure, Jonah discovers to his disgusted surprise that God *loves* the Nivevites who aren't even God's chosen people!

Jonah is the story of an unlikely hero who even when he's doing it wrong ends up getting it right. And God is right there working with him the whole time. Can you see a little bit of Jonah in yourselves? If you can ... if you *do* ... then you see how true this story is.