

January 24th, 2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 “Get Up On Your Feet!”

The book of Jonah doesn't come up in the lectionary very much, but when it does, I jump on. I think it's unfortunate that the story of Jonah has become kind of a “battleground book” between those who believe that every word of the Bible should be taken *literally* and those who *reduce* the Bible to nothing more than allegorical fables. I believe that the Bible is a collection of history, poetry, allegory, drama, satire, prophetic witness and more. “Pastor Jesse, does that mean that you don't believe that the bible is true?” No, I believe it's *all* true. That doesn't mean that it all happened. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the book of Jonah.

This story is not history, nor should it be treated as such. Yes, there was once a minor prophet named Jonah, who was the son of Amittai. He is briefly mentioned in the Book of Kings. The historical Jonah is thought to have lived around 750 BCE. The story of Jonah, however, is thought to have been written after the Babylonian exile, somewhere around 450 BCE. That means an unknown author wrote this story 300 years or so after the Prophet Jonah actually lived. That doesn't make it any less true though, because I believe that the story was written to drive home a prophetic message to the people of the writer's generation. Plus it's quite funny too, which probably puts it in the category of satire which tells me that God's word comes to us in a variety of ways.

So even though this story *isn't* history, a couple of facts still come in handy in order to better understand the story. First of all, Nineveh *was* an actual city ... in fact it was the capital city of Assyria. Historically, it was the Assyrians who had overrun the northern kingdom of Israel and destroyed Jonah's homeland. Secondly, as far as Jonah was concerned, Tarshish was at the ends of the earth. It was as far away as he could get from Nineveh. When I was a kid, “Outer Mongolia” was the same sort of place. Nobody could really picture where “Outer Mongolia” was, but

we knew it was about as far away from home as you could imagine.

The story begins with God calling Jonah to go to Nineveh to convince the Ninevites to repent. But of course, that's the last thing that Jonah wants to happen. These are Assyrians after all! He hates these brutal people! He doesn't want to go there. Jonah wants revenge for the destruction that the Assyrians brought on his homeland. Jonah's whole personal sense of justice is violated. So, rather than doing what God told him to do, Jonah immediately goes down to the port of Joppa, buys the most expensive ticket he can get for a boat to take him to Tarshish (think Outer Mongolia), because he thinks God won't find him there. Silly Jonah. As a prophet he should've know better.

While Jonah is sailing away on this boat, God whips up a storm and the ship begins to sink. So the sailors draw straws in order to find who is responsible for all this bad luck, and eventually, after a big hoopla about Jonah being responsible for the storm, they toss him overboard. The first "funny" happens when the storm stops, and the gentile sailors, who worship other gods, respond by worshipping the God of Israel and even offer God sacrifices. So in spite of himself, Jonah ended up converting a ship load of foreign, gentile sailors! Cue the laugh-track.

But that's not the end of the hijinks! God summons a big fish to swallow Jonah and he spends three days and nights in the belly of this big fish. Jonah is so stubborn that he doesn't pray to God for deliverance for three days! I'd be praying a lot sooner than that. Or maybe not. Am I that stubborn? Am I foolish enough to believe that I can run and hide from God? Anyway, more on that later. After hearing Jonah's prayer, God causes the big fish to spit Jonah out on the dry land. Which is funny because historical Nineveh is nowhere near a body of water.

Anyway, here's where we are with this morning's reading. God makes a second attempt to send Jonah to Nineveh. "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So, Jonah does *exactly* what God asks him to do. No more, no less. To ... the ... *letter*.

Remember, according to the story, the city is huge, three days walk across, which also contradicts archaeological evidence, but the message of the story wouldn't be as impactful if it was just an average-sized city. So Jonah goes to the city and walks for one day. Notice, he's very careful not to overdo it. He doesn't even make it to the halfway mark. He's not even in the *middle* of the city even though that's the ideal place for any other prophet wanting their message to spread fastest. Then Jonah cries out, "In forty days the city will be overthrown." So what is the result of Jonah's 1/3 effort? The people listen, and believe him, and they all repent. And when the king hears of the prophecy, he orders that everyone, even the animals, must fast - no food, no water - and they must dress in sackcloth, and cry loudly to God for help. They must give up their evil ways. They're like, "Well ... who knows? If we repent, maybe God's mind will be changed." And, guess what? That's exactly what happened.

Needless to say, everyone in the city that day was very happy about this! They're saved! Yay! Well ... everyone was happy except Jonah! In fact, he got really mad. He yelled at God - "Didn't I say this right in the beginning? I knew this was going to happen. That's why I headed for Tarshish! I knew you'd never go through with it! I knew even then that you would change your mind. You are a gracious and merciful God. You don't get angry easily and you are full of love. You turn your plans for punishment into program of forgiveness. I tell you what God - if you won't kill them, then kill me. I'm better off dead!" What's happening here? Jonah is so self-righteous and angry he'd rather die than lose face? God asks him *why* he's so angry, but rather than take the opportunity to deal with his anger, Jonah stomps off out of the city, makes himself a little shelter of leafy branches and sits down to have a good sulk.

End of story? Not even close! Remember, this God of ours is a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and full of love. God knows Jonah is worth the heartache, so God causes a broad-leafed tree to spring up out of the ground. And it grows over Jonah to cool him off and maybe get him out of his angry little sulk. And lo and behold, Jonah thinks this is

pretty cool. Literally! He's just sitting there, enjoying the shade. Life is looking up. But then God sends a worm to eat the tree and by morning, the tree withered away. When the sun comes up and the hot desert wind from the east starts to blow, Jonah is hot, dirty, sweaty and miserable. And once again, Jonah prays to die.

That's when God says to Jonah, "What right have you to get angry over this shade tree?" Jonah says, "Plenty of right! It's made me angry enough to die!" God says, "So how come you can go from happy to angry overnight about a little old tree that you didn't plant or care for, and yet you criticize *me* for changing my feelings about Nineveh? You're mad at me about changing from anger to pleasure and to save this big city of more than one hundred and twenty thousand childlike people who don't know right from wrong, to say nothing of all those innocent animals? What the heck Jonah?" (That was my addition to the text by the way). And thus ends the story of Jonah.

Throughout scripture, God has emphasized that God is gracious, merciful, faithful, constant, and all-loving. But here in Jonah, we find that God is also willing to change God's mind too. God remains free to be gracious to those who deserve punishment. Notice, too, that Jonah also remains *free* ... free to argue and resist. Free will! Imagine that! Sounds like stuff we've been learning in 1 Samuel doesn't it Bible study people? This story makes a significant contribution to the debate about predestination and free will. This story also tells us that God is inclusive. God's love is universal. In this story, a ship's crew and a whole city of Assyrian Ninevites choose to worship the living God of Israel! The message? God saves Gentiles too! How cool is that? Jonah doesn't think so. Jonah expects to be loved by God because he is supposedly a 'Law-abiding' Israelite. But he's a "letter of the law" kind of guy not a "spirit of the law" kind of guy. When he finds out that God loves the Ninevites, who are not even Israelites, he's fit to be tied. It rocks his world, and not in a good way. So ... did this story happen? Who cares. Is this story true? You better believe it is. Again, "God saves Gentiles too!" It's true! And this, folks, is probably one of the most familiar

stories in the Old Testament. A favorite for kids who are flannel board connoisseurs. Kids probably loved it back when it was first told too!

I also believe that this story has endured because it nurtures our own life of faith. Jonah doesn't do anything great. He is not a "hero" type. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire and imitate, we find that Jonah is ... well ... a whole lot like us. He's someone on our own level. Even when Jonah gets it right, like finally going to Nineveh, he does it wrong. But the whole time, God is right there working with Jonah to make things right. God doesn't sweep Jonah under the rug. God remains faithful in spite of Jonah's resistance and ineptitude, and in the end God's work is done. Can you see a bit of your own selves here? I can certainly see Jonah in myself. But isn't it encouraging to know that God can work even through people like Jonah and you and me?