

Sunday, January 24th, 2021: Third Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon on Jonah 3:1-5, 10, preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan
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It is really hard - and no fun at all - to get the tiny snippet of Jonah's story we heard today. It is a story that is best told all at once, to see the whole picture and get the whole message. So in brief the story of Jonah goes like this:

God tells Jonah to go preach to Nineveh, a great city that is the center of power in the Assyrian Empire. God tells Jonah to cry out against their wickedness. But Jonah says "no." He flees and tries to escape God by sailing away. But you can't escape God, who sends a storm that threatens to overwhelm the ship Jonah is on. Everyone on board prays to their own gods for safety and they come to believe, correctly, that someone on the ship has incurred this storm by angering heaven. Jonah admits it's him and tells them. "Toss me overboard." As soon as he hits the water the sea is calm. Experiencing all this, the Gentile sailors on the ship turn to Jonah's God.

But Jonah is still having problems with his God, who sends a huge fish to swallow him. Some people need to hit bottom before they turn away from their errors - and being in the belly of a fish is certainly pretty low. While he is there, he has a change of heart and sings a song of thanksgiving to God. On the third day, the fish vomits him up on the beach.

God tells Jonah again. "Preach to Nineveh" and this time, Jonah goes. His message is short and simple, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He doesn't even mention God's name. And yet the whole city is moved to repent - they even make their animals don sack cloth and repent! Their hearts are changed and, watching them, God's heart is changed. God does not destroy the city.

Jonah is not happy. It is not until this point that we find out why Jonah didn't want to go to the people of Nineveh: he didn't want them to change. He didn't want this city and these people - these outsiders - to hear God's call and repent. He tells God, "I know you are merciful (indeed he's experienced it first hand) and ready to relent from punishing!" Jonah wanted the city to be destroyed - because it was foreign, because its people had been sinful and cruel. The people of Nineveh worshiped other gods and were enemies of Jonah's people. He thought they didn't deserve a chance.

And yet, deep down he knew that the outcome he wanted was not in line with the God who called him.

Reading this story, I have to wonder, what kind of prophet this is? He refuses to listen to God, tries to run away, and is resentful when things go God's way. There are a lot of reluctant messengers in the Bible - Moses and Jeremiah to name two - but Jonah takes it to a whole new level. At the end of the story, he says he'd rather die than live with the consequences of God's mercy on the people of Nineveh. Who thinks this way? And why would God call someone like that?

There's a lot we can learn from this story, and some of the key lessons are about who God is. This story illustrates God's mercy to those who have sinned greatly - including both Nineveh and Jonah. We see God's persistence in calling Jonah and following him despite Jonah's many attempts to run away or hide. God is revealed in this story to be responsive to humanity - in this story God changes God's mind! We see the universality of God's salvation extending beyond Jonah and his people to their enemies.

The story also illustrates human nature. Our habit of assuming that our understanding of God is accurate and complete. Our tendency to put people into categories of US and THEM - with God always on the side of US. Our certainty that God's judgments and preferences align exactly with our own.

This story is a caution because Jonah is an exemplary believer... up until God actually calls on him. Jonah is committed to serving God right up to the moment he must extend his faith outside of his feelings and his beliefs and into action. The idea that he might have to live out his faith was a deal breaker for Jonah.

Why would God choose a prophet like this? Certainly, the city of Nineveh needed an intervention; they are described by their own king as evil and violent. And Jonah's prophecy, once he actually starts talking, is amazingly effective. The city - all of it - repents immediately and they do it with no promises of forgiveness. If reluctant Jonah can get a result like that, just imagine how it would have gone with a more cooperative prophet!

It is possible that confronting Nineveh was not the only purpose in this prophetic mission. After all, if telling the people of Nineveh how wicked they were and warning them of impending destruction was the only goal, then God surely could have picked a more expedient path than via ship and fish's belly. But that is not what God did.

God called Jonah.

God called Jonah to preach to people he loathed, to people who offended him and his religion. God called Jonah to a mission that was worse than being tossed in the sea and living in a fish's belly for three days.

God called Jonah to a task that he carried out half-heartedly with no passion or joy.

And I wonder if God might be calling us in the same way. Most of the time we experience a sense of God calling us through the things we are good at, the things we have a passion for. Music, writing, hospitality...public speaking, prayer, teaching...healing, organizing, managing money. Yet it might also be true that God is calling you in a way you don't expect, to use gifts you don't have, to touch people you do not like. And even through this strange interaction to save you, as well. As we learn from this story, God is persistent. God is responsive and in relationship with us. God loves limitlessly and universally.

One true thing about God's mission is: you can join it, but you cannot define it. God's mission will always go beyond your hopes and expectations. It might even be the case that, like Jonah, you will be called not according to your greatest gifts, but according to your greatest need. Because in the end, the one person in the story who was resisting the voice of God was the only

one who believed in God and whom God called directly. It was Jonah, who in his settled, comfortable faith thought he had God all figured out, whom God called.

It has become almost too common in recent years - and especially recent weeks—to talk about how divided our nation is, and our more local communities as well. The divisions are not just political, they are along all sorts of fault lines - including faith. There are calls for both accountability and reunion. Twin longings for vindication and harmony. In this atmosphere, we are tempted to view others as Jonah saw the Ninevites - as enemies undeserving of mercy. As believers who are committed to prayer and a relationship with God, we think we know how God should deal with them.

And yet, when God calls you, as we are all called in our baptism and as Jesus called to fishermen on the shores of Galilee, when God calls you to address divisions and violence and cruelty it might be you God is aiming to save.

It might be you that God chases when you try to escape.

It might be you that would rather be tossed into the sea than meet with “those people.”

It might be you that resents the inclusion of people you still can't see as deserving.

It might be you whose idea of God is too small.

I know it might be me.

In the end, we don't know what happened to Jonah. God admonished him, reminded him that it isn't for any of us to resent God's mercy. And the story ends there as an open question for us. If you were Jonah, what would you do?

Here's some encouragement: No matter how you respond to the call, God's mission will be accomplished! After all, even Jonah at his least cooperative moments caused the sailors to discover God and brought the Ninevites to repentance. There is not much you can do to stop God's mission.

So why respond at all? Maybe because God's mission involves you in ways you don't expect. It might be that when God calls you to address the brokenness in the world God is also calling you to mend the brokenness in yourself. That work is as uncomfortable as being in a fish's belly, and humbling as being vomited up on the beach, and enraging as watching your adversaries forgiven.

Yet it is necessary. Answering that call will help heal the world and help heal you.