

A Whale of a Tale – January 21, 2018 – Jonah 3:1-5

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Our Old Testament Lesson this morning comes from the Book of Jonah. When asked, what we most remember about Jonah is the old Sunday School story of Jonah getting swallowed by a whale and living in its belly for three days. What we don't often remember is why it happened to begin with.

Jonah was called to be a prophet, but he wasn't very good at his job. When God told Jonah to go to the horribly corrupt city of Nineveh, and announce to the people there that the Israelite God was not happy with them, in fact, so disgusted by their actions, God was on the verge of destroying the entire city, Jonah refused the job, and he ran in the other direction. When he got to the sea, he boarded a boat that was traveling to Tarshish.

When a prophet disobeys God in the Old Testament, God doesn't take to kindly to that. Suddenly a storm swept over the boat that Jonah was on. Frightened for their lives, the sailors began to pray to their gods. Jonah realized that this deadly storm was probably his fault for angering God, and so he told the sailors that if they wanted to leave, they had better throw him overboard. They readily obliged his request. Immediately, the storm stopped. But God wasn't yet done with Jonah. Suddenly a large fish, possibly a whale, swallowed him whole. From inside the whale, Jonah prayed to God for three days. Finally God relented, and instructed the whale to spit out the reluctant prophet onto dry land.

Again, God told Jonah to take a message to the people of Nineveh, and strangely enough, this time Jonah complied. He traveled to the corrupt city and did what prophets do best – he proclaimed to them their doom at the hands of an angry God. He gave them the message that they had 40 days before God would overthrow their city.

Jonah was surprised by their response. They actually listened to him and believed the warning he gave to them from the Israelite God. The rulers and people of Nineveh immediately changed their wicked ways. The entire nation began a fast and repented of their deeds. God, being a merciful God, saw their repentance and decided not to destroy them after all.

God was satisfied that the people of Nineveh were genuine in their repentance. Jonah, however, was not. Jonah believed that God should punish the city for their wicked deeds, and he thought they were getting off the hook too easily. So upset was Jonah at God's decision to spare the city from destruction, he left the city in a foul mood and brooded about it. Like I said, Jonah was a bad prophet. He really should have been happy the people actually listened to him and believed him. God rebuked Jonah for his bad attitude and lack of compassion for the people of Nineveh.

Contrasting this story, we have the lesson from Mark's gospel. Here we have the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, Simon and Andrew and James and John. According to Mark, these men did not hesitate when Jesus called them. As the story goes, Jesus came by them while they were working and invited them to be his followers. The men immediately dropped their fishing nets and left their boats to follow after Jesus.

Now realistically, the call of these disciples was probably not this abrupt. More than likely, the men didn't just walk off, dropping their nets on the shoreline, leaving their families and coworkers to gape in stunned amazement. There were probably a few arrangements to make, things to do at home, the typical tasks one does before embarking on something new. But Mark tells the story in this way, because he wanted to make a point. This wasn't just any journey they were headed off on – this was something big, something life-changing. And so, Mark portrayed this scene with intense urgency. I wonder, in our own lives, how willing we are to follow when God calls to us?

My hunch is, we often respond more like Jonah when it comes to our response to God's call, and less like James and John, and Simon and Andrew. Like Jonah we are slow to act and reluctant to do what God says. We gripe and moan and drag our feet. Like whiney children who don't want to do their chores when mom and dad tell them to. And perhaps there are even those moments when we get annoyed when God doesn't do what we think God should do.

So because of our reluctance, we can easily manufacture excuses for why we don't follow God "right now." Other things seem to us to be more important, or we have our own ideas about how something should be done. Very often the plans that God has for us have little to do with the plans we have for our own lives. Often they are inconvenient. It isn't what we had planned, it's not the way we expected things to turn out, or it's not the path we thought we would take. Sometimes, just like our friend Jonah, we simply don't want to do it.

Not only was Jonah reluctant to do what God had asked of him, but he was actually upset with God that God was willing to give the people of Nineveh a second chance. God was willing to show them grace, and that annoyed Jonah. He wanted to see the people of Nineveh get what they deserved. He actually wanted God to destroy them, not show them mercy.

In Jonah's eyes, they didn't deserve to be saved. Sometimes I wonder if we ever feel the same way? How often do we mistakenly think that we have a monopoly on God's grace? That God shouldn't show mercy to those people who look differently or think differently or act differently or sin differently than we do. Don't we sometimes too try to decide who is worth forgiving and who isn't?

Barriers of race, gender, religion, political tendencies, sexual preferences – all these differences between us and them. “Those” people. The ones who apparently have a completely different way of perceiving the world than we do. Sometimes we get stingy with God’s grace. As Episcopal priest Kathleen Wakefield stated, “We may find Jonah amusing, ridiculous, or appalling as he mutters and whines against God’s offer of redemption to the Ninevites, and as he tries to run away from God. But if we let the story touch us, if we plumb the depths of our own hearts, we will find Jonah there within us -- that part of us that judges and condemns, that desires revenge rather than justice, vengeance instead of mercy.”

Our friend Jonah spent three long days inside the belly of the whale. In that 72 hours of darkness he had time to think and maybe learn a lesson or two. Like Jonah, we spend a fair amount of time in the darkness. Feelings of vengeance eat away at us. Old wounds fester. Hurt feelings keep us isolated. Unresolved anger weighs us down. Sometimes we can carry these negative feelings for years on end.

Oftentimes it is we who suffer the most from these unresolved issues. Generally it doesn’t even impact the person toward whom we hold them. In Jonah’s case, the Ninevites were not affected by Jonah’s reluctance or bad feelings, only Jonah was. But when we refuse to let go of these feelings, we become damaged – spiritually, relationally, emotionally, and even physically damaged. It is we who choose to remain in darkness. It is we who stay holed up in the belly of the whale. Like Jonah, who sat alone on the outskirts of Nineveh, pouting and angry, we separate ourselves from God and from others.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. We can choose to let go of our issues and move on. Just like with Jonah, God is willing and ready to offer us love and mercy. God’s love and mercy is what can heal us and help us to leave the darkness in which we have chosen to reside. Obviously it does not change the fact that we were indeed hurt. It doesn’t mean that our anger was wrong. But it does help us to move beyond the hurt and anger into another place, a place of healing and a place of wholeness. A new place where we can finally move on.

Perhaps that is what those four fisherman saw when they saw Jesus that day by the seashore. Maybe Simon and Andrew saw in him a way to move from the things of the world that kept them stuck in darkness. Maybe James and John could sense in Jesus an overwhelming feeling of acceptance, love and mercy. They lived in a community that was under the power of Rome. They were an occupied nation. They understood having feelings of bitter resentment toward things they could not change. When Jesus came walking by and gave them a call, perhaps they sensed in him a new way of life. A freedom to live in a different way, outside the darkness of the world, outside the belly of the whale.

When we judge and condemn others, I wonder if that is less a commentary on how we feel about those who are different than we, and more an explanation of how undeserving we

ourselves feel? You've heard it said, bullies pick on people who are weaker than they because it makes them feel stronger. So when we judge and condemn others, maybe it's because we ourselves don't feel deserving of God's love and grace and mercy. We rationalize, if we can't get it, no one deserves to get it.

When we get stuck in the belly of the whale, down in the smelly darkness, broken, imprisoned by our issues, less than whole, and going through the motions of living, we are desperately in need of what God offers to us in Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes to us on the seashore, as we're standing there mending our nets, caught up in the ordinariness of daily life, how quickly will we be willing to drop the nets when he says, "Come on, follow me. I've got something better for you." Do a myriad of excuses come flooding from our lips? Or do we actually open ourselves to the possibility that maybe he's telling the truth. That by following him, things will be different, and we will experience grace, mercy and healing.

He promises to make us fishers of humans. Imagine if we really accepted that call. If we decided to follow him, and accept his offer of love and mercy for ourselves. That's the first step. And then what if we went out, dropped our defenses, and removed the barriers between us and those different from us. And then what if we shared that love and mercy to all those around us.

If we actually answered that call of Christ, to follow him in discipleship, imagine how much healing we could offer to this broken world around us? When we allow the grace of God to enter into our lives and heal us from our own hurts, we can become whole persons. And as whole persons we will be better equipped to reach out in love, mercy and generosity to other people. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, maybe we need to ask first, do we actually love ourselves? That's something for each of us to consider.