

Connecting with God – Jonah 3:1-5,10 – January 24, 2021

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When we hear the name Jonah, if we remember anything at all, we know that there is a story about Jonah surviving in the belly of a whale for three days. But most of us probably don't remember much more than that.

It's actually a pretty funny story about a very reluctant prophet. Jonah was called by God to do a task. God instructed him to go to Nineveh as a prophet and speak God's message to the people – that God was not happy with them and was on the verge of destroying them. Nineveh was a horribly corrupt city, and frankly, Jonah didn't want to go. He did not like the work that God had called him to do, so he decided to run away – in the opposite direction.

When he got to the sea, he boarded a boat to take him even further away. Well, a deadly storm overtook them, and the seasoned sailors grew quite afraid. They began praying to their gods for deliverance. Jonah realized the storm was probably God's response to him running away, so he told the sailors to toss him overboard. They prayed to the God of Israel, not wanting to hurt Jonah, but he finally convinced them to do so.

And as soon as they did, the storm stopped. But then a large fish swallowed Jonah whole, and he lived inside its belly for three days. While there Jonah prayed to God to save him, and eventually the fish spit him out onto dry land.

Again, God told Jonah to take a message to the people of Nineveh, and this time Jonah agreed to do it. When he arrived he accepted his job of being a prophet and proclaimed to the Ninevites their doom. But he wasn't prepared for them to listen. The people actually believed him, repented of their evil ways, and begged God for forgiveness. God listened to their pleas and showed them mercy, deciding not to destroy the city after all.

And this surprised Jonah, he was actually upset that God chose not to destroy them. He left the city in a foul mood and grumbled about it. God chastised Jonah for his lack of compassion for the people.

Like Jonah, instead of listening to God, we are often slow to act and reluctant to do what God says. We offer excuses instead of compliance. We seek to disconnect ourselves from God, running the other direction, trying to avoid the work we have been called to do. And then when God's work is accomplished in and through others, we chose to gripe instead of rejoicing.

God desires to connect with humanity. God longs for relationship with us. But, when that relationship asks us to do something we don't want to do, we choose to disconnect. It's easy to come up with excuses or find other things to do. 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.

In contrast to Jonah's reluctance to connect with God, the two groups of people in this story seek connection with God. In their peril, the sailors call out to Jonah's God, looking for a way to weather the storm that doesn't include throwing Jonah overboard. When alerted to God's anger, the Ninevites quickly repent from their destructive ways and seek forgiveness. These two groups seek connection with God when Jonah comes to them, they long for God's favor. And God hears them and responds favorably. God's work still gets done, in spite of Jonah.

So, we may wonder, if God's work still gets done, does it matter if we turn away from it? What matters here is that connections are lost. Jonah runs from God and he misses out on the relationship with God. He stewes in his own bad feelings and focuses on the negative. Instead of bringing hope to others, he brings a stormy darkness. He misses out on the joy that comes from connecting with God and refuses to celebrate when others do make those connections.

It is an ugly place in which Jonah has chosen to reside. A place where old wounds fester. Hurt feelings isolate. Vengeance distorts humanity. Unresolved anger weighs down. Left unchecked, these negative feelings begin to permeate one's entire existence.

As we draw closer to having experienced the ongoing effects of this pandemic, we are seeing more and more its impact on our minds and bodies. It is mentally grueling and physically exhausting. People wonder how much more of this can we take. The vaccine is here, yet the timeline for full release is still months away. The daily numbers of infected and dead continue to rise, but we grow numb to the numbers. Even the most positive people we know have grown weary. And for those who have experienced the disease or have seen its effects firsthand, the impact is so much greater.

We need our connections with God and with one another to get through this. It is that simple. Those connections give us the stamina to continue forward. We may wish we could run away, to isolate ourselves and wish for everything to go back to the way it was. Unfortunately, the only way forward is forward.

In this time of frayed nerves and growing frustrations, be gentle with yourselves and be kind to one another. When people have been living so long in uncertainty, our breaking points are closer to the surface. Take time to rest. Be generous with love, compassion, and forgiveness. And remember that God always longs to connect with us, and God's work still goes on despite the chaos we may feel. Look for the small victories and celebrate the tiny blessings – they continue all around us. With God's love for us and our love for one another, we will get through this.