

Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:6-14

I Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

Today, we get **Jonah!** *Six* short verses. Here's how it goes—the word of the Lord came to **Jonah a second time, God tells Jonah to get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message that God will tell him. So, Jonah set out and goes to Nineveh. Nineveh is a huge city—it takes three days to walk across it! Jonah goes in about a third of the way, and cries out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh *believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, from the greatest to the least significant, put on a sackcloth.***

Then, we skip *four* verses, but in those *four* verses, **word of all of this reached the king, and he got up from his throne, and he removed his robe, and he covered himself with sackcloth, and he sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings *and* animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall call out forcefully to God that each may turn back from their evil way and from the violence, the cruelty, the injustice which is in his hands, in his power. Who knows? God may turn back and repent; God may change God's mind; God may turn back his burning anger, so that we do not perish.”**

That's a rather significant *four* verses for the lectionary to omit, don't you think? The **king heard the call to repent and then called on everyone and everything under his power to go into a period of mourning and fasting and reflection and intense prayer to God that they, each one of them, would be given the power to turn back from the evil way and the violence and cruelty and injustice that rested in each of their hands, that was under each of their control. Let anyone who has ears listen. This is individual and communal work. This is as personal as each one of us, our individual words, our individual actions, AND this is about our society.**

Back to the text, **[And] when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed [God's] mind about the calamity that [God] had said he would bring upon them; and [God] did not do it.**

If this is all we know, **Jonah** is a prophet rock star, right? Okay, did all this really go this seamlessly, this smoothly? (*pause*) No.

In *Paul Harvey* fashion, “*Now, for the rest of the rest of the story.*” (Oh, that really dates me, doesn't it.)

Jonah is living somewhere in the **northern kingdom of Israel** (up around the altar). **God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to God's attention. Yes, God is paying attention to the evil actions of God's beloved humanity. So,**

Nineveh is way over here (far to my left—over by the window close to the lectern). So, upon hearing this call **Jonah** heads to **Nineveh** straightaway, right? (*pause*) No, wrong! **Jonah heads straight for the port city of Joppa** (by first pew on my right, just to the right of music stand) and **catches the first ship he can for Tarshish** which is way over here (far to my right—over by the window by the piano). **Tarshish** is like on the coast of Spain, about as far as you can get from **Nineveh**, *2500 miles to be exact*.

God is pretty fixated on getting Jonah to do what God has asked Jonah to do. God hurls a great wind upon the sea, tosses that ship like a toy boat in a whirlpool. All the sailors gather and cast lots to see who is to blame for the evil that's happening to them. Now, that's an interesting approach to get to the root cause of chaos. Well, the lot fell on Jonah, and eventually, he comes clean that he's a Hebrew, and he worships the LORD—who made the sea and the dry land. The sailors ask him what he's done because, at some point, Jonah had told them that he was fleeing from the LORD. The sailors then think out loud, "What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us," because the sea was continuing to rage.

Jonah, somewhat heroically, tells them to throw him overboard because he knows this is pretty much his doing.

The sailors try to avoid this course; they rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't make it because the sea continued to rage against them. So, they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea and the sea stopped its raging.

Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Talk about *a dark night of the soul*, and *slimy*, and *smelly*. For all my love of my comfy, bean husk, meditation pillow, *sometimes, our contemplative reflections take place in less than ideal circumstances*.

But, this dismal state of affairs did push Jonah to utter a heartfelt prayer from his place of desolation. **God heard it, and God spoke to the fish, and the fish vomited Jonah onto the dry land.**

THEN, we come to the verses for today. *THEN*, this call came to **Jonah for the second time. THEN, Jonah got up and made his way to Nineveh.**

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Oh Lordy, there is so much here. And to wrap our heads around all of this we have to understand the players, and just **what exactly God was asking of Jonah**, and **what Jonah's resistance was about**, and **what God is up to in all of this**.

So, **Nineveh** was in **ancient Assyria**, *a sworn enemy of ancient Israel*. **Nineveh** is located in modern-day **Mosul** in **northern Iraq**, *about 70 miles from Syria*. **Mosul** was the largest city held under the control of the **Islamic State (ISIL)**. Oh, are you getting the magnitude of this now?

Roll back time to a year ago, when **Mosul** was still firmly under the control of the **Islamic State**, and *atrocities are being committed. Executions of civilians as they tried to flee. Captured women and girls being sold to sex slave traders.* I think we'd agree that these actions would qualify as **evil** and **violent**. And **God comes along and tells you to go and proclaim the word of the LORD to these evil people committing these atrocities.** Think *you'd be making allowance* for the *possibility* that **these evildoers might actually turn back from their evil way and violence?** Or, *would you think they are a lost cause, completely beyond redemption, and be hopping the next boat to Tarshish?*

Do you see just what a radical thing God was asking of Jonah? Those whom we find most *distasteful, most barbaric, most so-not-like-us—God wants them to find their way out of evil, God wants them to find their way out of violence, God wants their society, every single facet of it, to be saved, to be made whole. God is that generous. God is that gracious.*

Do we understand that from God's sight, no one, no one is beyond redemption, no one is beyond the possibility of change? And God wants to use us as instruments of this movement toward wholeness.

Oh, we can try to flee to Tarshish, but *the storm is going to follow us*, and it's **not going to let up until we make our way to that place that we so don't want to go, that place where the transformation needed seems too impossible, so improbable, so beyond our imagination, so beyond our power to effect.**

Okay, I need to do a little caveat here. God is asking Jonah to do a hard thing that Jonah doesn't want to do. It is a very short step *from here to internalizing the belief that God/Jesus always asks us to do the hard thing, even when we don't want to do it.* I mean, it's right here in the scriptures today. *But this belief doesn't always serve us well when we are trying to sort out our call and vocation.*

SOMETIMES, God/Jesus DOES ask us to do the hard thing, even when we don't want to, but when that call comes, it is going to be in service to greater wholeness, a more expansive heart space, more freedom, more grace.

If I make **"Jesus always asks me to do the hard thing, even when I don't want to"** into LAW, then we have, what I call **"Buck up, suck it up, take one for the team Jesus."** *This Jesus does not take us into the **wideness of God's mercy** that also takes into account our deepest desires and longings. This Jesus is relentless, and hard, and demanding.*

Sometimes, *I have let this hard, demanding Jesus be the master who has run my life, but I have come to understand that this is not the Jesus who is sweet in my ear; this does not reflect the God who wants to co-create with us or the Spirit who is tender; this is not the Jesus of my experience; I don't even believe in this Jesus.*

Yes, God/Jesus will ask us to do hard things, and sometimes, we won't want to do them.

Who wants to *turn back around* and *actually seek out one's enemy* in the hopes that *they can turn their life around*?

Who wants to *examine their own evil way, their own complicity with violence and cruelty and injustice*?

Who *automatically rejoices* when *this anathema-of-a-human-being* in front of you *blows apart the straightjacket of a box* that you've placed around them by *actually changing* and *receiving the mercy that God so freely offers when amendment of life is made tangible*? **Jonah couldn't get there.** God's **mercy** was a *bitter pill* that *Jonah just couldn't swallow*. *What about us? Do we choke on mercy, too?*

But when you are wrestling with the *Jesus who is asking you to do the hard thing*, ask if it's **in the service of grace and mercy and freedom and his ever-widening love**, OR is it **in service of constriction and a relentless taskmaster**. *The first is of God*, and *the other is diabolical*—that which seeks to *separate us from our deepest, truest self* which **lives and moves and has its being** in a **God** who, in the words of the psalmist, is **“gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.”**

God asks Jonah to do the hard thing in the service of holding open the possibility that *even those doing the most extreme evil and violence, cruelty and injustice, can, in fact, change their way, change their direction.*

But how will they know of this possibility if we all flee to Tarshish?

No, there is an *ache* in *God's heart*; there is a *longing* in *God's heart*. *Long for what God longs for—that all may know the wideness of God's mercy, that all know the depth of God's love.* **Turn back** from whatever evil rests in your hands, **turn back** from whatever violence, whatever cruelty, whatever injustice lies in your control and under your power.

Mourn, lament, all that has been laid waste by *“the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf,”* to quote one of our confessions. *Shake off the slime of your sojourn in the belly of the fish*, and then, **get thee to Nineveh, whatever and wherever your Nineveh might be.**

God's got some people in desperate need of hearing the good news that there is another way. **Proclaim the God** who is **“gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness,”** allow for the *possibility* that others really can *change*, and don't be surprised if **along the way, you discover the mercy for which your own soul has been longing, too.** Amen.

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