

3EpiphanyB12 Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Jonah has to be one of the strangest books in the Hebrew Bible. It doesn't revolve around a classical Israelite prophecy. It's a tale contrasting the divine, inclusive, all embracing nature of God with the sheer stubbornness of a prophet who couldn't see past his own flag. Before we get to the fun stuff, let me frame the humor inside the historical context.

Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II (~786-746 bc) of the Northern Kingdom. We really don't know too much about Jonah. He was an obscure Galilean prophet (from Gath-hepher) who counseled Jeroboam II. At that time, Israel's greatest enemy was the Assyrian Empire, the most powerful military and political force around. If you need a reference point, you can establish a time line by looking at the Book of II Kings. The Assyrian Empire stretched from Iran to Egypt and its capitol was Ninevah.

The book of Jonah was written over 300 years after the days of the prophet. Within 30 years after the death of Jeroboam II (722/721 BC), the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, and thousands of residents of its capital, Samaria, deported and the city resettled by refugees from other Assyrian conquests. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, was forced to pay a hefty tax to its conquering neighbor in order to keep its borders fairly secure. It was a terrible humiliation for the remnant peoples of Israel to swallow.

Our text today begins with God's second call to Jonah. We all remember what happened the FIRST time God asked Jonah to go to Ninevah, don't we? This time, it's off to the Most Evil Empire, maybe because Jonah remembered, too! When Jonah reaches Ninevah, he's still in a lousy mood and the ultimate welfare of the Assyrians of Ninevah remains on the bottom of his "I don't care list." So, after walking only one day instead of three, (sort of like stopping at the end of Brown Station Road as it becomes Spring St and pretending like you've gone to Market and State Sts) he delivers a simple message of 8 words.

In a nutshell, he tells them: Guess what! The end is near. You're toast in 40 days. Too bad. And the response is so immediate, that Billy Graham would be jealous! The evil people of the Most Evil Empire believe in God and repent so hard and so fast that everybody goes on a slam-dunk fast! Then the Assyrians, from the evil king down to the best cow gets dressed up in sackcloth and ashes. Instead of annihilation, there is redemption.

Of course, God is tickled pink and calls the whole judgment thing off. But Jonah is really ticked. In fact, he's as mad as mad can get. He didn't want it to work. He hates Ninevah and was looking forward to it being toast. To be really honest about it, at this moment, he has more hatred than God has mercy. That's why he ran away in the first place. If God was going to deliver his enemies, Jonah wanted to be on the other side of the world, so he wouldn't have to see it. **(Pause)**

The book of Jonah isn't a history lesson – but it serves as a very good reflection of a spiteful life. It's a parable that speaks to us on a much deeper level than we realize. It's a very visual picture of how cranky the human heart can be when a person realizes that God loves somebody else as much as God loves them. It tells us about how easy it is to become so entrenched in our own stuff, that we lose the ability to see or even consider

the people of another race and culture – or even sitting beside us this morning or someone we passed on the road this morning asking for a handout - as being equal to us in the eyes of God. Oh my. What in the world was God thinking! How could **they** be so eligible to receive the same abundant grace?

Over and over again, the Bible tells us that we are truly responsible for how we live, and for how much or how little we share God's love with the rest of the world. The Book of Jonah really doesn't have an ending, and that means the story is really about us. And how it ends, it turns out, is also up to us.

Whenever we respond to God's nudges and call with the best part of ourselves and not with the very least we can do, then the story continues. When we willingly and wholeheartedly share our time, talents, and resources to advance Christ's work in the world, the story continues. **When we recognize, welcome and embrace the diversity of all of God's children, the story continues.** When more of us can believe and live out what inclusive love and an extravagant welcome means without impersonating sharks in a feeding frenzy, the story continues and our churches will stop dying.

When we stop hearing accents, when we stop seeing skin tones, when we stop creating barriers, then anger and self-destructive behavior always has to move out and let the restorative work redemption take place. When we allow ourselves to change our minds about something – or someone, just like God did in our story today, then we are blessed and can be a blessing to others. And the story continues.

"A few years ago, Richard Cardinal Cushing wrote about the church's need for courage. He said, "If all the sleeping folks will wake up, and all the lukewarm folks will fire up, and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, and all the depressed folks will look up, and all the estranged folks will make up, and all the gossiping folks will shut up, and all the dry bones will shake up, and all the true soldiers will stand up, and all the church members will pray up, and if the Savior of all will be lifted up...then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known." 1

Yes, God loves you. And, yes, God loves them. The Bible tells us so. And no matter how hard Jonah tried, he couldn't stop it. Thank goodness.

amen

1. "The Need for Courage," Eric S. Ritz, www.esermons.com, *TheWeeklyDetails*, 1/23/2009