

THE STORY OF JONAH

He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah 4:2

Today our core story from the Bible is the Book of Jonah. I imagine the Session selected Jonah as one of the stories to be taught to our children because it is such an adventure. The story of Jonah includes several great images. Of course, the most memorable image is the great fish which is often pictured as a whale. In fact, when the story of Jonah comes up in our cycle of stories every six years, Sue Zografos creates a great fish in the room we call "Tales from the Script." The children learn the story of Jonah while sitting in the belly of a great fish.

Even though the story of Jonah is one I remember from childhood, it has not played a central role in my understanding of the faith. In fact, I do not remember this book being mentioned in my Seminary Education at all. In my forty some years of preaching, I have never preached on a text from Jonah. It has been very interesting the last ten days to read and wrestle with the four chapters which make up the Book of Jonah. The narrative includes much more than a big fish story.

The book opens with God coming to Jonah with a command. God tells Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was an Assyrian City in what is now Northern Iraq. Jonah was asked to go to the city and preach against their wickedness. This can be understood as being the call of Jonah.

Like Moses and others before him, Jonah is not thrilled with God's call. Instead of heading towards Nineveh, he attempts to flee towards Tarshish. Tarshish was a Phoenician City in what is now Spain. Jonah makes his way to the port city of Joppa and got on a boat and headed west.

God was not going to allow Jonah to get away. God caused a storm to begin to threaten the ship. The sailors on the ship discovered that Jonah was running away from God's command. They felt Jonah was responsible for the storm. Jonah tells them to throw him overboard, but at first, they refuse. They try to hard to row back to shore. They were not able to make any headway. So finally, they decided to throw the guilty party, Jonah, overboard.

Jonah is not in the water long. God sends a great fish that swallows Jonah. In the belly of the great fish, Jonah prays to God. He thanks God for saving him from the sea. Jonah admits the ways he has failed God and spurned God's call on his life. He asks for deliverance.

God then directed the fish and Jonah was spewed out on dry land. God gave Jonah a second chance to complete his original mission. He made his way to the large city of Nineveh. He told the people that in forty days they would be overthrown. First the people and then the king began to repent. They put on sack cloth and ashes as a

sign of their repentance. They promised to turn from their evil ways. They would stop their violent acts and end evil practices. The whole city asked for forgiveness.

The result of Jonah's mission was a change in behavior by the people of Nineveh and a change of heart from God. We read in Jonah 4:10: **When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.**

Is that not a terrific adventure story that can entertain ten-year olds? A more challenging question to answer is what does this story teach us about our faith or our own spiritual journey. Let me share with you three approaches to this core story.

Many of the early Christians read the Old Testament looking to learn about Jesus. They looked for passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that might prefigure events in Jesus' life. In the story of Jonah, they focused largely on the image of Jonah in the belly of the great fish. Many of them saw Jonah's three days in the belly as prefiguring Jesus' time in the tomb. As one scholar tells us:

The Early Church Fathers read the story of Jonah being swallowed by the fish as a type of Christ's burial and resurrection. Paulinus compares the fish's belly to the tomb of Jesus, while Ambrose compares it to the womb of Mary. Theodoret and Cyril highlight the hell-like nature of the fish's innards to find a type of Christ's descent into hell. Finally, in a crude analogy, Tertullian compares the vomiting of Jonah out of the fish to the resurrection of Jesus.

I do not believe this approach to reading Jonah is very helpful to us. We should not be reading Christ into every part of the Old Testament. But I share this with you to help you understand Christian art. In some Christian art Jonah in the fish is linked with the resurrection of Jesus.

A second understanding of this passage focuses on Jonah trying to run away from God. God has called him for a purpose. Jonah is not thrilled with this call. Instead of arguing with God like Moses did at the burning bush, Jonah tries to run away. He thought he could make his way to the edge of the known world and escape God's call. But God found him on the ship and brought him back to finish his task.

It has been the experience of so many people through the centuries that we can't run away from God. One of the most famous poems from the 19th century by Francis Thompson begins:

**I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,**

**And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'**

This poem called the Hound of Heaven pictures God pursuing a human soul that seeks to escape. But God's love never gives up. C. S. Lewis is another example of a person who did not seek God, but rather God sought him. He tells us:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words "compelle intrare," compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation."

The good news is that God's love never gives up. As the Lord pursued Jonah so God's love is available to us. We need just to give in and say yes.

A final lesson that we learn from the experience of Jonah is that God's love and grace are so broad and wonderful that we human beings do not like it. I had never noticed the reason that Jonah tried to run away before looking at this story over the last ten days.

Jonah sought to avoid God's call because he was afraid. Jonah did not feel he did not have the skill to bring God's message to the Assyrian people. Jonah was not afraid of failure. Jonah attempted to flee because he was worried that he might be successful.

We learn this in our text. Jonah prayed, **"O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.**

Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh. He wanted them to be punished for their wickedness. He relished them getting what they deserved. He did not want to warn them of the wrath to come, lest they repent. Jonah believed God was just too gracious. He worried that his preaching would get the people of Nineveh off the hook.

I believe that Jonah speaks for many of us at different times in our lives. We want God to be forgiving towards our shortcomings. We want God to forgive our friends and families and all those we love.

But do we really want God's love available,
To the parent who abused their child,
To the spouse who deserted the family,
To the friend who betrayed you,
To the co-worker who stabbed you in the back.

As we look at the horrible images from Ukraine would we really want the Putins, Stalins, Hitlers et all of this world to be offered forgiveness if they would just repent.

Or would we, like Jonah, want to run away from that possibility. We want God's love for our people, not those we consider bad.

Yet our Lord on the cross, in the midst of suffering death in one of the cruelest ways devised by human beings said, "Father forgive them." In maybe his most difficult command, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies. This is not easy for us to do. John Calvin acknowledges this but tells us:

Assuredly there is but one way in which to achieve what is not merely difficult but utterly against human nature: to love those who hate us, to repay their evil deeds with benefits, to return blessings for reproaches. It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them.

I believe the way to start to begin to see enemies as the image of God is to pray for them. It is in praying for them, that we begin to accept them as human beings made in the image of God. It is in praying for our enemies that we begin to accept the truth that Jonah feared the overwhelming love of God is for all. We can begin to grow in loving like God loves.

Maximus the Confessor tells us: **But I say to you, the Lord says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you. Why did he command these things? So that he might free you from hatred, sadness, anger and grudges, and might grant you the greatest possession of all, perfect love, which is impossible to possess except by the one who loves all equally in imitation of God.**

Jonah tried to run away from this great love – may we run towards it.