

Embracing the Love

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Let us join the familiar story of Jonah right in the middle. After the most familiar part of that story, when Jonah is swallowed and later regurgitated by a *big fish*, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh..’” I have two questions. What “word of the Lord” came to Jonah the first time? What happened between the first time “the word of the Lord” came to Jonah and the second time it came.

You may have figured out by now that, when the “word of the Lord” came to Jonah the first time, it was the same message: “go to Ninevah,” that great capital of the nation of Assyria. It was Assyria that had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel between 827 and 826 BCE. Jonah’s story is set during the exile following that crisis.

What did Jonah do? That’s the familiar part of the story. Jonah, the reluctant prophet, hopped on the first ship out of country, but all did not go smoothly. A great storm came up and nothing calmed that sea. The sailors prayed and called on every god they could think of. They were at the point of casting lots to see who they would throw overboard to appease the gods. Jonah finally stepped forward and took responsibility for the storm. After a mild protest, the sailors threw Jonah overboard. The storm stopped instantly and the sailors were happy.

The ship sailed away and Jonah was left treading water, but not for long. Very soon, Jonah was swallowed by a whale, a big fish. He spent three days inside the fish and, in that time, Jonah was quite remorseful. When the three days had passed, the fish literally vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then, “the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” What was that word? “Go to Ninevah.”

The call was no different the second time it came, but somehow, because of his experience, Jonah’s response had changed. His hatred of the Ninevites was no longer a problem. Jonah went to Ninevah with a warning from God and the Ninevites responded. “The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God” (v.10).

The story of Jonah is something of an extended parable. Like Job, it is a dramatic story. The book of Jonah is considered prophecy and was probably written after Israel’s return from Babylonian exile (400’s BCE). This story illustrates how God called and empowered a reluctant prophet and, by extension, a reluctant people. Israel’s hope was found in their experience of God’s providence during exile and beyond. Jesus referred to the example of Jonah for an image of his own three 3 days in the tomb.

I am offering here a rather unorthodox interpretation of the Jonah story. It is not intended to replace other interpretations, but represents one way to understand this dramatic story – this whale of a tale. This interpretation can help us see something important about ourselves.

Jonah’s first response to the call from God was “NO! I won’t go!” Then, he ran away. Why? It seems that prejudice, anger, resentment, and perhaps some fear had totally

engulfed Jonah. He was unable to say yes to God. He was unable to consider the possibility of loving the Ninevites as God did. He was unable to be open to the possibility of them responding to his message and, in a sense, loving him back. His feelings – his *self* consciousness – overshadowed his God-consciousness and his other-consciousness.

This brings us to the symbol of the whale – the big fish. Jonah kept running away from intimacy – from openness to God and others – until he was swallowed up by a black hole of his own making. After Jonah was spit out and thrown up, he wound up responding very differently to God’s call. He went to Ninevah and warned the people. They heard and they turned.

In all honesty, Jonah didn’t change completely. At the end of the story, he still hated the Ninevites. He was not happy that the Ninevites had been spared. He was still filled with some anger, resentment, and prejudice. But God was continuing working with Jonah to help him understand that God’s love for Jonah and Israel was the same as God’s love for all people including the rulers of Ninevah. Like most of us, Jonah was a work in progress.

By moving through that experience of death, or at least shaken up, Jonah was able to see beyond the black hole – the whale – of his own anger and his own feelings that kept him so self conscious. The point of this teaching is that this awakening of love, whether directly from God or translated through another, comes at its own time, but it does come. The challenge is to let love be awakening within us and to let God’s love awaken another through us.

Jonah was not scared into relationship with God. It was not fear alone that prompted Jonah to follow God’s call. He experience in exile, having been swallowed up by his own bitterness, showed him how closed off he had been. The experience awakened him, at least somewhat, to love and to work. His prayer inside the fish is remarkably like many of the psalms, especially the psalms of lament.

“I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and [God] answered me;
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me;
All your waves and your billows passed over me.
Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight;
How shall I look again upon your holy temple?
The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;
Weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
Yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;
And my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
What I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” (from Jonah 2)

This prayer was addressed to a God who loved Israel in their exile and who called them to move past their hatred and bitterness and to share God's love even with those who had been their captors.

What is the nature of this love? It is the “wonderful thought that God loves you with a tenderness, a generosity, and an intimacy which surpasses all your dreams. ...God loves the whole of you, just as you are.” (Abbe de Tourville, *Letters of Direction*, 1939) It takes faith to see life from the perspective of this wonderful thought. Such is the nature of this love. It takes courage to choose to see life as an offering to you, as accepting and embracing love.

What may be keeping you from embracing that love, from feeling fully accepted? Could it be something from childhood? Could it be some demons from your family system way back that you can't quite seem to exorcise? Could there be something that “affects your expectation of the quality of God's love?” (Francis Dewar, *Invitations*)

Being on stage, in a play or in public speaking, can make anyone nervous and self-conscious. When awareness of self and how others are viewing us takes over, then ironically it is more difficult to be ourselves. We find that we are working hard to be the image we want to convey to others. It is only when we let go of that image, that self-consciousness, can we really be ourselves.

What black hole blocks you from embracing love, from being love, and from being fully yourself? The

“world is filled with voices that shout: ‘you are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’ These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap – of self-rejection” (Henri N Henri Nouwen)

Rejection of our true selves is painful. It is also not good stewardship of our lives. The world is wasting a precious element – *you*. Talk with someone you trust. Get counsel. Pray. Invest yourself in a community of faith that accepts you for who you are.

Theologian Paul Tillich refers to the acceptance as grace – accepting that we are loved, that the underlying reality of the universe is disposed in our direction with an attitude of love. Grace just happens. You can't make it happen. You can't force it – most of the time. Grace strikes us when we really need it, when we're in great pain and restlessness, in the dark valley of meaninglessness and empty life. It strikes us when the feeling of separation from another person is deeper than usual – when we feel disgusted with ourselves and when our weakness and lack of direction become intolerable. Suddenly, a wave of light breaks into our darkness with the message that you are accepted (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*). You are loved and capable of loving.

In the real world, people do reject you sometimes. Honestly, we have no power to make others like us and accept us. It is just beyond our ability. Like Jonah, we can remember. We can choose to trust God who created us, who accepts us, and who loves us as we are.

This message recurs throughout the Bible and is summarized in the words of a prophet in exile: “you are precious in my eyes because you are honored and I love you.” (Isaiah 43:4)

God calls us *as we are*. Of course we need to grow, get better, and learn, but it is us God calls, us God loves -- not the *you* or *me* we might become. You are a precious gift and as am I. This congregation is a precious gift to the world. If you and I cannot be ourselves, then we cannot be anyone else. Whatever is keeping you from embracing love and acceptance is just getting in the way. It is people such as Jonah, you and me – reluctant and imperfect people such as you find right here at Crossroads Church -- that God chooses to love and through whom God chooses to work and to transform the world by the power of shalom, of love. Thanks be to God!

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 NRSV

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ¹⁰When 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.

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 (The Message)

1-2 Next, God spoke to Jonah a second time: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." ³ This time Jonah started off straight for Nineveh, obeying God's orders to the letter.

Nineveh was a big city, very big—it took three days to walk across it.

⁴ Jonah entered the city, went one day's walk and preached, "In forty days Nineveh will be smashed."

⁵The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide fast and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it—rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers.