

## Beyond the Fish Story

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Do you remember the story of Jonah? It was written a long time ago, probably during the fourth or maybe fifth century before Jesus, but it was set hundreds of years earlier, during the eighth-century BCE. Jonah was among the Israelites sent into exile by the Empire of Assyria. This happened during the first temple period while Solomon's Temple still stood in Jerusalem. Assyria had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and was threatening the southern kingdom of Judah. It was in that setting that the story of Jonah took place. This story might be called a prophetic legend.

What do you think about when you hear the story of Jonah? The big fish of course! Jonah is a "whale of a tale," but there's a lot more to the story than that. To hear its meaning, we will need to find ourselves in the story, and see how it speaks to us.

This is how the story began. "The Word of the Lord came to [a man named] Jonah." These were typical words used in the Bible for the calling of someone to prophetic work. But the call was not one Jonah wanted to hear. "Arise, go to Nineveh" [the capital of Assyria!]" God said, "Warn them, they aren't doing so well. I am not pleased! They're on shaky ground! Tell them that, Jonah!"

But Jonah did not tell them. Instead, he decided to run away. He ran down to the dock where he got on a ship and headed out to sea. But you can't run away from God, Jonah! No, none of us can run away from God!

The ship he was sailing on found itself in the middle of a terrible storm at sea. The crew tried everything until finally they began to pray. They asked God to show them who to blame for the terrible storm. Jonah's cover was blown when the lot fell to him and the crew tossed him overboard. Immediately the storm stopped and Jonah, instead of drowning, was swallowed by "great fish." And he was in belly of the whale for three days and three nights. Jonah prayed in the belly of the whale the whole time. One of the gospels says that Jonah was a sign pointing later to Jesus, that Jesus was in the tomb three days and then came out to new life. That was probably a bit of a stretch since the math doesn't quite fit. And besides, unlike Jonah, Jesus willingly answered God's call. Anyway, finally the fish threw him up onto dry land. Jonah was saved and God tried again.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time and you better believe this time Jonah went to Nineveh. And Nineveh was a great city, a huge city. They said it took a man three whole days to walk from one end to the other. Of course, archeological explorations have measured ancient Nineveh at more like a mile and a half across, but the point is that it was a great city in the ancient world and represented a great power. And Jonah walked part of the way and then opened a storefront church in the street where he began to warn the Ninevites. "Forty days and you guys are going down unless you change your ways!" Remember that forty days represented a deeply symbolic time period, a period of spiritual renewal often in a desert place. Forty days symbolized a journey through the wilderness to new life.

Lo and behold, it worked! The people of Nineveh, the hated Assyrians, confessed, repented, and humbled themselves. They turned to God and prayed to be spared. And the story says that God repented of the punishment that had been planned, and spared the Ninevites.

There is another chapter in the story of Jonah that follows the repentance and salvation of the Ninevites. Jonah was not happy that God spared them. He wanted to see them punished for their evil deeds. So Jonah went and pouted. Then some really strange things happened with Jonah, but they don't really concern us at this point.

Remember this was a legendary story, not historical. It was a kind of parable. So what was the point? What did the Jonah story mean to the Jewish people? It was a story of reconciliation, written in a time after the Jewish people had returned home after the Babylonian exile. They met a lot of resistance trying to resettle their land and, eventually were conquered

once more by the armies of Alexander the Great. Living around unfriendly and powerful people was pretty much part of life for them.

The Ninevites were the powerful people in this story of Jonah. They symbolized the powerful nations in every generation of Israel's history: the Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, the Greeks of Alexander, and finally the legions of Rome. As a people, the Jews had to get along with them in order to survive.

But the Jonah story was different than most. Relationship with God had always been their own special identity. It was what separated the Jewish people from all the other cultures and peoples around them. And now, in this story, God was telling Jonah to preach to the Ninevites, the Assyrians! God was calling him to warn them, to save them in fact. And Jonah didn't like it. As a personification of the Jews, Jonah didn't like it one little bit.

In many ways, the message of Jonah was the message that God was God of all people, not only Jewish ones. It was the message that God's providence and God's desire for relationship extended even to the powerful and hated Assyrians. And it was not a very popular message in the Jewish community represented by Jonah. Later, when Jesus spoke a similar message, the people of his own village turned on him and tried to throw him off a cliff!

The tale of Jonah the prophet can speak to each of us today, but to find that meaning you'll have to find yourself in the story. You'll have to find yourself hearing what may be God's call for your life. You may find yourself running away and somehow trying to avoid that call, and maybe spending some time in the belly of a whale.

And you'll hear that call again and respond differently. You'll have to find yourself facing significant fears and perhaps going out to confront powerful people or just one powerful person in your life, or facing a frightening situation, or coming to accept the scared child inside you.

To find yourself in the story of Jonah, I think requires embracing three questions. What is the call? What is the fish? What will you do next? These are questions I cannot answer for you. And you cannot answer them for me. But we can help each other. That's what it means to be church and to be fellow travelers on life's journey.

As we come to the "take home" part of this teaching, I invite you to set aside whatever may be whirling around in your mind, to lay down whatever your body may be reacting too with tension, and consider "What is your call?" What is it that God, or the Spirit, or the universal life force may be inviting you to do in your life. There are two prompts that can help discern that invitation. First, what is it that brings you to life?" (*Invitations*, Francis Dewar, p. 8) Second, what has a deadening effect on you?" (*Invitations*, p. 8) As you think about it, the feeling you may have had in response to one or both of these questions may help clarify "What is God inviting me to do in my life?" There may only be a spark of understanding within you right now, but "your task is to fan it into fire." (*Cry Pain, Cry Hope*, Elizabeth O'Connor)

My experience is that God's invitation, God's word that comes to us, doesn't necessarily feel pleasant or exciting. It can, but often it is more unsettling and inconvenient. Twenty-five years ago, I was a staff minister and a church musician when I was challenged by a colleague to consider the possibility of being the pastor of a congregation. The feelings I felt were not altogether pleasant ones: more like a gnawing in my stomach or a mix of guilt, inadequacy, and envy all rolled together. So I kind of ran away from it by deciding not to think about it. But the idea seemed to form a relationship with me. Some things clarified and, ten years later, I was pretty sure that was my invitation. One thing led to another and here I am, two weeks away from my tenth anniversary as your pastor.

More often than not, when we feel the tug of a call, it can be uncomfortable or scary. Usually it's as simple as a sense that we should speak up in a situation that seems unjust, or that we should stand up when there is pressure to stay seated, to stay in our place. But there are also times when the call is larger, when it demands more of us, when the invitation is to act in a way that will cost us money, support, or friendly relations with people we care about. Many times, like Jonah, I have turned the other way, tried to run away from God. Yet God always runs

with me, always waits for me, and always loves me. God always speaks with us, stands with us, and loves us—"what is the call."

"What is the fish?" What is the whale's belly in which you find yourself, the wilderness experience that can seem so desolate, yet in the end spits you out on the dry land. This can be an experience through which something changes inside us and the journey forward suddenly becomes clearer. What is the fish that holds you today? Could it become a place of eventual transformation? Helen Keller, that remarkable woman who faced more challenges in her life than probably any five of us have in ours, wrote, "I thank God for my handicaps; for through them I have found myself, my work, and my God."

And the third question for finding yourself in the story of Jonah was "What will you do next?" What will you do once that big fish spits you out onto the dry land. The first call is never the last chance. God is a God of second chances and more chances--who never even numbers the chances. The invitation is always to us. God always reaches for us and always embraces us with love.

How will you step up and take responsibility for your own life, for your own faith journey? There is an old spiritual that begins,

Jesus walked that lonesome valley  
He had to walk it by himself  
Nobody else could walk it for him

The last verse said

You must go and stand your trial  
You've got to stand it be yourself  
Oh, nobody else can stand it for you

And the words are true. God calls you to live your life and do your ministry, and sing your song. God calls this congregation to live and serve and sing and heal. No other congregation can do just what you can do. The call is to do it. And even when we run and hide, the call comes again to live and serve and sing and heal. And people will hear and turn and find the life of the Spirit in this place. Don't ever doubt it!

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

<sup>3</sup>The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So 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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

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