

Sermon: Jonah and the Ninevites

1/24/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many of us are familiar with the story of “Jonah and the Whale.” The story begins with God calling on a prophet named Jonah to go to Nineveh and “cry out against it.” Nineveh, which is located in modern-day Iraq, was a large city whose citizens, who numbered around 120,000 people, were well-known for their wickedness. So well-known, in fact, that Jonah immediately got up and set off, the opposite way. Jonah was fleeing to Tarshish, to a city located on the western coast of Spain, as far away from Israel and the God of Israel as he could go. But he couldn’t escape God. After setting sail, the boat he was on encountered a mighty storm, powerful enough that everyone feared the ship would be destroyed. Amidst the chaos and confusion, they learned of how Jonah had angered God, leading them to pick him up and throw him overboard. Not long after the storm subsided and we hear of how a large fish appeared and swallowed up Jonah.

Jonah remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Only then did he pray to God for forgiveness and promise to go and be God’s voice. Three days and three nights, a lot longer than it would have taken me to pray, and a reminder of just how much Jonah had to fear about going to Nineveh. After his prayer, we are told that God spoke to the fish and had it spew out Jonah onto dry land. It is there, presumably on that sandy shore, that our Old Testament lesson for today picks up. “Get up and go to Nineveh,” God says to Jonah a second time. “Go and proclaim the message that I tell you.” Now, we’re not told how long it took for Jonah to get there, but we do hear the message that God gave him along the way. While Jonah walking through the city, we hear how he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And to his surprise, the Ninevites did not respond to his short message by mocking or threatening him. Instead, they repented, and in so doing convinced God to change God's mind. As they say, all's well that ends well, right? Except that's not the end of the story.

You see, when Jonah heard that God had forgiven the Ninevites, he was filled with rage. "After all that they have done," Jonah prayed, "how can you forgive them? I mean, yes, I know that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, but we're talking about the Ninevites here. We both know all of the wicked things that they have done. I'd rather die than see the day that they are forgiven." No, I was not being overdramatic there. He actually said that he would rather die than have them forgiven. "Now just wait one second, though" God responds to him, "who gave you the right to be angry?" And rather than answer, Jonah leaves the city. He wanted to see what would become of Nineveh when the forty days were up, so he found a place to the east with a good view. As you might imagine, given that it was modern-day Iraq, it was hot and dry where he was sitting, so God "appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head." For one day, the bush made Jonah very happy. Then God appointed a worm to come and attack the bush, causing it to wither and die, and for a hot and thirsty Jonah to lament his ill fortune once more. "Woe is me," Jonah cries out, "I'm so hot, why not just kill me now?" "If you have the right to be this concerned about a bush which I gave you," God concludes, "then imagine how much right I have to be concerned about the many animals and people living in Nineveh."

Without this ending, the story of Jonah is often described as a cautionary tale about trying to run away from God's call. You can run, we are told, but you can't hide. No, you probably won't spend three days and nights in the belly of a fish. But God will find you. So if you just heard your call for the first time, learn from Jonah. Don't run away. Instead, embrace the call

that God has placed on your life. And if you have run, learn from Jonah as well. Pray to God for forgiveness and the willingness to accept your call when you hear it again. Learn from Jonah, so that in the end, you might be like Jonah. Until we keep reading and get to the end of the story, and find out that Jonah might not be the ideal role model after all.

A few years ago, an associate professor at Cal Berkeley ran a psychology experiment involving my wife's least favorite board game of all time, Monopoly. He wanted to see what would happen when all the skill, talent, and luck required to win the game is rendered irrelevant. How will someone respond if they are given more money, more opportunity to move around the board, and more access to resources than the other player? How will they respond, in other words, when it is clear that the game is rigged and their victory is all but assured, all because they won the coin toss? His results were surprising. During the experiment, the players who were privileged with more began exhibiting both verbal and non-verbal signs of dominance. They began smacking their game pieces as they moved around the board, pumping their fists, bragging about how much money they had, and even eating more pretzels from the communal bowl in the middle of the table. Then, when the game was over, they were asked about their experience playing, and when the privileged players talked about why they had won, they did not mention how the game had been rigged. Rather, they talked about all the moves they had made, the money they had earned, and the property they had bought. Their privilege was something they assumed was their right, a sentiment also shared by Jonah as he sat next to that withered bush.

You see, Jonah was not just one of God's chosen people, he was a prophet. In all likelihood, God had chosen him to go to Nineveh because Jonah had already shown himself to be faithful. No, Jonah did not immediately go. But if there was anyone who deserved to be forgiven, who had earned that right and privilege, it was him. He was convinced that he deserved whatever

blessings God might give him, even if the game was rigged for him and his fellow Israelites. And what of the condemnation and judgment awaiting everyone else, in this case the Ninevites? Well, the honest truth is that for Jonah it didn't seem to matter that the Ninevites had sought forgiveness. All that mattered was that they were not among God's chosen people. They had done wicked things, just like he and the Israelites had done wicked things; for the Israelites, specifically, things so contrary to God's will that God stripped the Israelites of the Promised Land and dispersed them throughout the surrounding lands. But while the Israelites deserved to be forgiven, in his mind, the Ninevites did not, and there was nothing they could do about it.

I would like to think that I'm not like this Jonah, that I don't view myself as having earned the many blessings which God has given me and that I don't judge those who are different and less fortunate than me as simply getting what they deserve. I would like to think that I'm extending the same love and grace to others which God has shown me. Then again, I also know that I'm extremely competitive when playing board games like Monopoly and that I'm not always the most gracious of winners, or losers for that matter. The truth is that we all get caught up in this pattern of judgment from time to time. We all have people whom we decide are not worthy of God's love and grace. Maybe it's because of their race, class, age, appearance, religion, or political affiliation. Either way, we all have people whom we believe don't deserve to be treated like God treats us, and if we have to spend three days and nights in the belly of a large fish to prove it, then so be it. Just so long as we get what we have earned and they eventually get what's coming to them.

Except, at the end of the day, Jonah's issue wasn't with the Ninevites, nor was it with their wickedness. Remember, he too had acted contrary to God's will and needed to ask for forgiveness. No, his issue was with God. What made Jonah so angry and what makes us so angry

is that we don't own God. We don't get to decide who God forgives. God's freedom makes us uncomfortable. It makes us feel as if we are the ones who have been wronged when God chooses to show grace and love to a democrat, or even worse, a republican. But it need not be this way, for in God's freedom, we are free as well. Free to plead, free to repent, and free to love. Free to admit that we are wrong and change our minds, just as God changed God's mind. The great irony of today's Old Testament lesson is that Jonah is traditionally lifted up as the person who faithfully followed God's will, even if he did not want to at first. But in the story it is the Ninevites who listened to God, who sought forgiveness, and who ultimately changed their hearts and minds.

Who is the Ninevite in your story? Who do you believe will one day get what they deserve because they are not like you, not like me? My guess is that I'm not the only one who just had someone or some group come to mind. As we see in the story of Jonah, it's easy to forget how incredibly blessed we are and to judge others. It's much more difficult to admit when we are wrong, to change our mind, and to ask for forgiveness. May we always remember that, just as God changed God's mind about Nineveh, there was once a time when God changed God's mind about us. May we have the strength, courage, and faith to be willing to change our minds too. Amen.