

JONAH AND NINEVEH



The Scroll of the Prophet Jonah 3:1 "The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD."

How appropriate it is that this morning's first reading is from the scroll of the prophet Jonah. This is in fact the only time in our three year cycle of Sunday Readings that we hear from him. But at a time when there is such division amongst us as a people, and such difficulty in listening and talking with one another, politically, racially, and even parochially, we need to pay careful attention to the story of Jonah, that reluctant prophet and hapless mariner. Now most Episcopalians

would probably have a hard time finding the little book of Jonah in their Bibles, slipped in there between the books of Obadiah and Micah. Yet the story carries a message serious enough to warrant its inclusion among the books of the Hebrew prophets. Many of us remember from Sunday School the bit about Jonah being swallowed by the whale, but the rest of the story is usually a bit less familiar. So what do we really know about the story of the prophet Jonah?

According to a one-sentence reference in the Second Book of Kings, Jonah, the son of Amittai, came from the village of Gath-hepher in Galilee, near Nazareth, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Nothing more is known of Jonah outside the scroll named after him. That book of the prophet Jonah opens with the Lord saying to Jonah: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Now Nineveh on the Tigris River was at that time the Capital of the great Assyrian empire, in what is now known as the country of Iraq, which was as hostile to the Jews then as it is today. Indeed in 721 b.c.e., as previously noted, the Assyrians attacked and destroyed forever the Northern Kingdom of Israel, capturing and dispersing 27,000 Israelites who were never heard from again, the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel. Thus asking some obscure minor Jewish prophet from the Southern Kingdom of Judah like Jonah to go and condemn the people of

Nineveh would be like asking some modern day Israeli nobody to go to Syria and preach to the ISIS caliphate that they were all going to hell. Jonah didn't want any part of that assignment, and so he tried to run away, as many of us do from those difficult conversations with our friends and neighbors who may support the other political party, or the other candidate, or who may be of another race or ethnicity than us, or who were part of the other group than ours in regards to disputes with the last Rector here. How do we talk to each other, how do we listen to the views of others who may not agree with us, how do we treat one another, how do we respect the dignity of every human being?

Jonah choose to run away from that conversation and that call, and instead he went to the seaport of Joppa (the modern day Israeli harbor of Jaffa) 'and found a ship going to Tarshish,' a Phoenician trading post on the Atlantic coast of Spain that was literally at the other end of the known world from Assyria. But you cannot run away from God and his call to reconciliation. So the Lord unleashed a violent storm at sea. The ship he was on threatened to founder, so the frightened sailors lightened the vessel by throwing the cargo overboard. When that didn't work, they drew lots to find out whether the ship was in danger because of some guilty person aboard, and the lot, of course, fell to Jonah, who admitted that he was a Hebrew

fleeing from the Lord's call. Begging Jonah's God to forgive them, the sailors threw Jonah overboard and the storm subsided at once. Then God sent a great fish to swallow up Jonah, who remained alive in the belly of the whale for three days before being vomited back up on the very shore from which he had fled. The Lord then renewed his call to Jonah a second time as noted in today's reading, to go and preach repentance in Nineveh. This time the prophet obeyed. He entered the great city, an exceedingly large capital, which would take three days to walk from one end of the city to the other! And there in its midst, Jonah declared God's judgment upon them.

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Jonah preached. That was it, that is the sum total of Jonah's prophecy in the Bible; an eight word sermon. Jonah might have been warming up to something considerably longer than that, but no one will ever know, because no sooner did he get that sentence out of his mouth than the whole city repented on the spot! From the king downwards the inhabitants repented and put on ashes and sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. A royal decree was issued ordering a fast for everyone, including the animals, that they neither feed nor drink. The king called on all the citizens to renounce their evil ways in the hope that God would spare them. And how did God respond when he saw what the Ninevites had done? God did indeed repent of the evil which

he had said that he would do to them, he relented and the doom of that great city was averted.

With an eight-word sermon, Jonah had accomplished more than all the other Hebrew prophets put together. He had converted the biggest city in the known world. Thus Jonah should have been delighted at his enormous success. He should have been ecstatic right? No. Jonah was so angry that he could die. Everyone in this story repents, except for Jonah, who just slinks off to the outskirts of the city and hopes that God will decide to destroy it after all. Jonah is not really interested in the people of Nineveh. He is not really interested in understanding their point of view, in hearing their stories. No, Jonah wants them dead, all of them. They are his enemies.

There is a divine sense of humor loose in this ancient Jewish fable and even Jonah's sulking cannot keep God from playing with him a bit more. While Jonah sits hunkered down in his tent outside the city, watching for, and hoping still that God would destroy them all, God arranged for a castor-oil plant to grow rapidly over his head to shade him from the heat of the sun. And Jonah liked that plant; Jonah liked that very much. But at dawn the next day God sent a worm to attack the plant, and it withered and died. The sun then beat down on Jonah's head and a scorching east wind added to his misery. Jonah was pissed. He fainted from the heat, and once again he wished for death. God

brushed aside his self-pity and derided Jonah for being so upset about a plant that had cost him no labor. "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" God asks in disbelief. "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night, and perished in a night. --- And should not I (then) be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" And so ends the book of the prophet Jonah, with that lingering question from God. Should I not care about the people of Nineveh, God seems to ask Jonah, who seemed to care more for the survival of that plant than the people?

If that were not the end of the book, I would expect the Jonah to respond to that question. "No, God," I imagine Jonah saying, "you should *not* be concerned about the citizens of Nineveh, no matter how many people and animals live there. Not only do they not know their right hands from their left; they also do not know right from wrong, nor the Lord God Almighty from a hole in the ground. Wipe them out! Kill them all! That is what you told me you would do, and that is what I told them you would do. So do it! They are the enemies of my people." Jonah simply could not believe the possibility that God's idea of justice or righteousness might not coincide with his own; Jonah

could not accept that God might be gracious to others, as God has been gracious to him, and to us.

"As God said earlier to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And (Jonah) said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Like Jonah, too many of us, are too often distracted by trivial things and ignoring the people at hand, discounting them, dismissing them, dehumanizing them, while foolishly valuing something insignificant, unwilling or unable to engage with those perceived as our enemies, politically, racially and even parochially, too self-righteous to listen to others, to care for them, to respect the dignity of every human being. We are right, and they are wrong, we think. "There's no talking with them!" we say. We want them judged, and we want them gone! This story pokes a hard finger in the ribs of those of us who want God's understanding and mercy for ourselves and God's vengeful justice for those 'other' people, who don't know their right hand from their left. We rejoice when undeserved blessings come our way, and cry foul when it happens to others. Apparently undeserved blessings are only supposed to go to the deserving like us.

For you see, my friends, there *is* something inherently unfair in the notion of God's grace. God does not seem to keep track of things the way we do. God does not seem to spend a lot of time deciding who is worthy and who is not, like we do, like

who is on the supposed 'right' side with us, and who is not, such that we, like little children, too often cry out "It's not fair." No, it is not fair. It is grace. Our God is a God of abundance and generosity and compassion, who seeks the reconciliation of all people to each other and to Himself, and who calls upon us to do the same, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and not be distracted by trivial matters, when it is the people of God that really matter. We are all Ninevites and ne'er-do-wells, only I do not think God would put it like that, because those are our human labels, full of human judgments that come far too quickly to our lips and our actions. From where God sits, I expect we all look more like hurt, sick, lost little children, all of us in deep need of mercy and forgiveness, and God's grace, for all of us really don't know our right hands from our left, we just think we do. And thank God that our God is gracious, and we are all nonetheless blessed. AMEN