



This morning's readings are bracketed by two stories about being called by God. I'm guessing you're quite familiar with both texts. Both are notably picturesque. Each, in its own way, has inspired memorable art and countless scholarly analyses. But I think the following passage offers a perspective we won't find elsewhere.

"One of the overarching messages from the Book of Jonah is compassion. Jonah was a prophet, and even though he had let God down in numerous ways, he was still forgiven because God showed him unlimited love and compassion. God also modeled forgiveness and mercy for Jonah in how God dealt with other people.

"Compassion is important when you're part of a family or even a community of people with different personality types and life experiences. That includes living a vibrant life among other residents at an assisted living community such as Bethesda Gardens in Phoenix, AZ."

We're in the process of moving my mom to Connecticut, but unfortunately there isn't a Bethesda Gardens around here.

Anyway!

A marked contrast between the Jonah text and the Gospel is that as far as we can see, Andrew, Simon, James, and John answer Jesus's call without hesitation, even though it's the middle of a workday. "Bye, Dad! Get some more day laborers," and off they go. Jonah, on the other hand, could not be more reluctant to answer God's call. The redaction in today's lectionary leaves a lot of good stuff out of what is already a short book. We come to the lesson only after God has commanded Jonah, "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

An aside: Do you ever suspect that the Old Testament is prejudiced against cities?

It's easy to imagine why Jonah doesn't want to obey this command. Ninevah, the capital of Assyria, is a big deal. Assyria is a great threat to Israel. During this period—around the eighth century BC—most cities

in Israel were quite small. Jerusalem, for example, comprised about 150 acres. In area, an acre is about the size of a Little League baseball field, meaning that walking across it would take less than five minutes. Nineva, the oldest and most populous city of the Assyrian empire, covered about 2000 acres and was heavily guarded, with a city wall whose perimeter was about 7 ½ miles long and, in some places, 148 feet wide. Moreover, Nineva was a major enemy of Israel. I imagine Jonah feeling the way one of us would feel if God commanded us to prophecy throughout Kabul, Afghanistan.

But as we know, Jonah doesn't go to Ninevah at first. Instead, he takes a boat to Tarshish. During the trip, he's thrown overboard during a storm. God protects him by producing a huge fish to swallow him, and for three days Jonah sits inside the fish, wishing he had JUST GONE TO NINEVAH when God asked him. Fortunately for Jonah, God is absolutely determined to get him to Nineva and has the fish vomit him onto the shore. "NOW will you go?" This time, Jonah goes.

When Jesus calls the first Apostles, their conversion to his mission is total and instant. Jonah is the perfect example of a reluctant convert. He knows all along what he should be doing, but he ignores God's voice.

There's a perfect description of reluctant conversion in one of my favorite mysteries, *Overture to Death*, by Ngaio Marsh. In this book, Henry, the 23-year-old son of the squire, ponders an upcoming fox hunt.

"Henry spared a moment to regret his own decision to give up hunting. He had loved it so much: the sound, the smell, the sight of the hunt. It had all seemed so perfectly splendid until one day, quite suddenly as if a new pair of eyes had been put into his head, he had seen a mob of well-fed expensive people, with red faces, astraddle shiny quadrupeds, all whooping ceremoniously after a very small creature which later on was torn to pieces while the lucky ones sat on their horses and looked on, well satisfied. To his violent annoyance, he had found that he could not rid himself of this unlovely picture."

I underwent a similar conversion about 15 years ago. Since the age of 16 I had seesawed back and forth, loudly and obnoxiously, about whether to stop eating meat. I always had a good excuse not to make the change. At the time I was doing a lot of food writing and recipe testing, and I frequently had to work with meat recipes. Besides, I wanted my kids to grow up eating all kinds of foods. Besides, I had once written an article about the horrors of butchering, so maybe I had done my bit. Besides, I needed the protein. Besides, it wouldn't make any difference. Besides, besides, besides, besides, besides.

"I couldn't eat meat if I knew about butchering," a friend told me reproachfully. "I'm sensitive that way."

But you *do* know, I wanted to say. We all know. Don't worry, I'm not going to start lecturing you about vegetarianism from the pulpit. But what happened to me was that I read a horrifying book about industrial farming and suddenly thought, "I've had it. I don't want any part of this." Giving up meat probably wouldn't make a difference to anyone but me. But I knew my only choice was to remove myself from that world.

I also knew it was going to be hard, but knowing something's going to be hard and actually experiencing the hardship are two different things. Everyone says it's hard to take care of failing parents. Yet I confess I honestly thought it wouldn't be hard for me. I would just—you know—do a lot of reading and thinking about it. And now here I am, worrying about my mom and thinking, "This is so hard." Yes! Things that are hard ARE HARD, and they don't always get easier with time.

Three days inside the fish had to be hard for Jonah. Perhaps he also said, "But this is so hard" as he made the three-day trek shouting "Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" It must have been gratifying for him to see how seriously the Ninevites took him. Their king "arose from his throne, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamations and published through Ninevah, 'Let neither man or beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man AND BEAST [sigh] be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let everyone turn from his evil way.' " God sees that the Ninevites have, indeed, turned from their evil ways. He takes pity on them and decides not to destroy the city after all.

It's none of Jonah's business what God decides to do, but he flies into a rage. Here he's gone through so much to finally obey God, and now God won't even punish the city whose existence has caused Jonah so much trouble! "I pray thee, Lord," says Jonah, "is this not what I said when I was still in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." (This is a pathetic excuse. "Why should I bother to obey when I knew you were just bluffing?" Hard as it is to believe, Jonah is jealous of the Ninevites for winning God's favor.) "Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live."

God sends a plant to grow over Jonah's head to shade him, then sends a worm to kill the plant. "Do you do well to be angry about the plant?" he asks Jonah. Jonah *still* doesn't back down: "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die!" This marks Jonah as perhaps the brattiest character in the Bible, and therefore one of the most believable. God patiently explains why he saved Ninevah, and the book ends on that high note: we never learn whether, or what, Jonah answers.

What Jonah does not want to accept is that God is merciful even to people who don't deserve it. And God works through people who don't deserve the honor of being his messenger. Jonah could be any of us. He ignores God's request and rationalizes his reasons why. Then he has a temper tantrum because God forgives the Ninevites instead of killing them. God has a lot to put up with in Jonah, and in all of us. May we listen to his message and learn to deserve it.

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