

“Big Ego, Big Fish, Big Success”

Jonah

(unless otherwise specified, the Bible passages are taken from “The Message”)

“One day long ago, God’s Word came to Jonah, Amittai’s son: ‘Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Ninevah!’

Preach to them They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.’ “

Ninevah, why Ninevah? They were wicked people there. For folks back then saying “Ninevah” would be as if we were imagining a city filled with Saddam Husseins, and Josef Stalins, and Osama Bin Ladens, and Timothy McVeighs. Not a nice place. This was a place where chariots drove over pregnant women. It was evil. Why would God care about them? Why would god send Jonah, a faithful Jewish man there?

Well, Jonah wasn’t having any of that, thank you very much!

“But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish---as far away from God as he could get.

But God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering. The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called in desperation to their (pagan) gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, “What’s this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we’re in trouble and rescue us.”

Then the sailors said to one another. “Let’s get to the bottom of this. Let’s draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who’s responsible for this disaster.”

So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

Then they grilled him: “Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What family? What country?”

He told them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship God, the God of heaven who made sea and land.”

At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, “What on earth have you done!” As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from God.

They said to him, “What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?” By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control.

Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It’s all my fault. I’m the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you’ll get rid of the storm.”

But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging.

Then they prayed to God, “O God! Don’t let us drown because of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best.”

They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down.

The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.

The pagan sailors seem smarter and better than Jonah. They prayed—to every god they had—they tried to get Jonah to pray to his God, our God. They tried to keep Jonah alive.

Then, finally, they threw Jonah overboard, asking for forgiveness, and the storm quit.

Then they did something wonderful. They didn’t say, boy that was lucky. They didn’t say, that storm was just one of those things. No, they did the best thing—they began believing in God, praying to God, and changing their lives.

The next verse, 17, is the one we all know about:

“Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish’s belly three days and nights.”

It doesn’t say whale, it says big fish. And we don’t need to get all technical or biological here—the point is that God chose to discipline Jonah.

Jonah was supposed to be a prophet, someone who spoke for God, someone who obeyed God.

Jonah was now in a very interesting and dramatic and stinky time out.

We know about time out—or the naughty step—or sit in the corner—or the old go to your room. Its' a time for child and parent alike to cool off and think. It's an opportunity for the child to repent of his or her disobedience.

Jonah did repent. He showed this by praying to God.

“Then Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish.

He prayed:

'In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God.
He answered me.
From the belly of the grave I cried, 'Help!
You heard my cry.
You threw me into ocean's depths,
into a watery grave.
With ocean waves, ocean breakers
crashing over me.
I said, "I've been thrown away,
thrown out, out of your sight.
I'll never again lay eyes
on your Holy Temple ."
Ocean gripped me by the throat.
The ancient Abyss grabbed me and held tight.
My head was all tangled in seaweed
at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root.
I was as far down as a body can go.
and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever—
Yet you pulled me up from that grave alive,
O God, my God!
When my life was slipping away,
I remembered God,
And my prayer got through to you,
made it all the way to your Holy Temple .
Those who worship hollow gods, god-frauds,
walk away from their only true love.
But I'm worshiping you, God,
calling out in thanksgiving!
And I'll do what I promised I'd do!
Salvation belongs to God!"

God responded by letting Jonah out of his time out fish.

“Then God spoke to the fish, and it [spit Jonah out onto] the seashore.”

One person said it was such a cruddy prayer, the fish spit up.

Then God gives Jonah his marching orders, again.

“Next God spoke to Jonah a second time: Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Ninevah ! Preach to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.”

This time Jonah started off straight for Ninevah, obeying God’s orders to the letter.”

It was about time. Jonah had learned that God was no one to be trifled with. Some of us can relate to that, can’t we? When we’ve gone against God, it has brought trouble—a little trouble or a big trouble, like huge debt, or bad relationships, or addiction or even jail. Some kind of trouble always follows when we go against God. Not necessarily involving being swallowed by a fish—but hey, we live in the Midwest, in a landlocked state.

Back to the story—

“Ninevah was a big city, very big—it took three days to walk across it. Jonah entered the city, went one day’s walk and preached, “In forty days Ninevah will be smashed.”

That may be the shortest sermon on record, one sentence.

It was also a very effective and successful sermon’ it got folks repenting. Maybe there was some connection between the shortness and the effectiveness?

“The people of Ninevah 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.

When the message reached the king of Ninevah, he got up off his throne, threw down his royal robes, dressed in burlap, and sat down in the dirt. Then he issued a public proclamation throughout Ninevah, authorized by him and his leaders: “Not one drop of water, not one bite of food for man, woman, or animal, including your herds and flocks! Dress them all, both people and animals, in burlap, and send up a cry for help to God. Everyone must turn around, turn back from an evil life and the violent ways that stain their hands. Who knows? Maybe God will turn around and change his mind about us, quit being angry with us and let us live!”

They repented, big time. From the king on down to the animals, it was burlap clothes and a fast—no food or drink.

After all, “Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will decided to let us live and will hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.” (The Living Bible)

Well, it worked.

“God saw what they had done, that they had turned from their evil lives. He *did* change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn’t do.”

God is like that. That is the whole point, or as one (computer) source put it:

“The who book was about God’s hope to be reconciled with even the worst of people”

The thing is, despite his success---and oh wouldn’t pastors and bishops and priests be pleased with this big successful result! Jonah did not like it.

“Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, “God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!”

So, God, if you won’t kill them, kill *me*! I’m better off dead!”

God had a very reasonable reply to Jonah’s ranting and raving.

“God said, What do you have to be angry about?”

Jonah had succeeded. He was the most successful prophet in the Old Testament. Usually the prophets weren’t listened to at all. Or they were killed.

And, how was it hurting Jonah for a city to turn away from its sins and turn to God?

Well, as my husband would say, Jonah was in a mood.

“But Jonah just left. He went out of the city to the east and sat down [to] sulk. He put together a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and sat there in the shade to see what would happen to the city.”

He went off, still hoping to watch some good old fashioned mass destruction.

It didn't happen.

“God arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up.”

What a lovely, nice thing—shade for the grouchy, sulking Jonah.

But wait, there's more.

“But then God sent a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the shade tree and it withered away. The sun came up and God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head and he started to faint. He prayed to die: 'I'm better off dead!'”

Oh no, here we go again. That Jonah has such a temper—he's so selfish—so self-centered and so dramatic about everything.

Again, God is reasonable.

“Then God said to Jonah, “What right do you have to get angry about this shade tree?”

Jonah answers back—angrily and stupidly.

“Jonah said, “Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die!”

And so, once again, God reveals who God really is. God really is merciful, and loving, and compassionate beyond our understanding:

“God said, “What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Ninevah from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?”

God understood the people of Ninevah; they weren't any brighter or more advanced than children. They were pretty much stuck in the Terrible Two's of NO! and MINE!, only in more dangerous ways. All the evil they had done was because they did not know right from wrong.

Jonah had been honored to be the one that taught them, but he never considered it an honor. He plain flat-out rejected it.

Oh my, there are so many things to take from this story.

We can realize that God loves everyone and wants even the worst people to turn from their sins and be reconciled to God.

We can take it that we run great and terrible risks when we go against God.

We can understand that God will give us a second chance.

We can understand that God can use strange and even amusing ways and circumstances to teach us and change our hearts.

We can see that everyone, from pagan sailors to wicked Ninevites, and even our own enemies can turn to God, and as Christians we need to help teach them, not condemn them.

We can recognize that the old, old Bible stories are great stories that help us in our lives.

May it be so.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)