

Sermon – “Turning Around”

Scripture Readings – Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:11, Mark 1:14-20

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Our first scripture reading is Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:11. Jonah stands out as a prophet of God primarily because of the fish story that surrounds him. Rather than a lot of prophetic sayings, the book tells a story about an incident in the life of Jonah. As the story unfolds, God calls upon him to proclaim a word of judgment against the city of Nineveh and he runs away instead. Jonah boards a ship for the furthest port, but his plan is foiled by a storm. Jonah gets tossed into the sea where a huge fish swallows him. While in the belly of the fish, Jonah repents and turns around. The fish spits him out on dry land and Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach repentance. The Ninivites turn around and God turns around. Jonah has a difficult time swallowing God’s mercy to strangers and, rather than rejoicing, Jonah pouts! Hear now the word of God.

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 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. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The LORD God appointed a bush,^[a] and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the LORD said, "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. 11 And should I not 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?" Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:14-20. The fish metaphor continues as Jesus calls fishermen to repent and become disciples. The word “repent,” literally means “turn around—change the direction of one’s life!!” Rather than turning and running in the opposite direction as Jonah did, these fishermen drop everything, turn around and follow Christ. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Turning Around”

The Text: *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the calamity God would do to them, and did not do it. Jonah 3:10*

Let us pray. We thank you, merciful God, that your constancy does not equate to stubbornness and that your steadfastness does not preclude a change of heart, a turning around. By your grace may we have the same capacity. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Most of us remember the story of Jonah from our childhood. It’s a story of adventure, surprise, fascination, and disobedience! God told Jonah to go in one direction and Jonah turned around and went in the other direction. Jonah’s three days in the whale offers him a “time out,” an opportunity to sit and think about what he had done, not unlike the “time outs” children receive from their parents and teachers when they disobey. Not unlike the “time outs” we give ourselves when we get older because we know it would be unwise to do or say something that could hurt the people closest to us.

While Jonah is in the belly of the fish, he “repents,” he turns around and he changes his mind. When the fish finally spits Jonah onto dry land, he receives a second chance. This time Jonah goes to Nineveh!

In Judaism, the story of Jonah is read for the services of Yom Kippur, a holy day designated as a time to reflect on and repent of one’s sins. It is shared as a parable of profound truth, and offers the listeners an opportunity to take an honest look at the ways they turn away from God, like Jonah. It is my hope that as Christians, listening to Jonah’s story today in this time of worship, we too, can take a look at ourselves, discern the direction of our lives and our attitudes toward others! What are we being called to turn away from in order to follow Christ? What are we being called to turn toward?

According to theologian James Newsome, Jr. in his book The Hebrew Prophets. *It is unfortunate, that during the last hundred years or so the question of the historical value of Jonah has become a point of controversy ...among fundamentalist Christians. Some persons even going so far as to claim that the belief in the historical nature of Jonah should be a test of*

one's religious orthodoxy. As such controversies often do, this one only serves to obscure the real issues raised by the text...by the story.

Most biblical scholars interpret the book of Jonah as a parable or an allegory, which borrowed the historical figure of Jonah to emphasize the message brought home by the story. According to Newsome: *One should not stumble over the problem of whether the story of Jonah is 'historical' anymore than one should stumble over whether Jesus' parables of the day laborers and the prodigal son are 'historical.'*

Both of these stories reveal insiders resenting the generosity extended to the outsider, much like Jonah! Remember how the all day laborers resented the compensation given to the laborers who worked only a few hours and how the older brother would not come to the celebration of his younger brother's repenting, turning around and coming home.

Set in the reign of Jeroboam II in the eighth century BCE, Jonah was probably written in the post-exilic period, sometime in the late 5th to early 4th century BCE. Those who understand the story as an allegory see it as the unfolding history of Israel. Jonah symbolizes the nation of Israel. His turning around and running in the opposite direction symbolizes Israel not listening to the prophets before the exile about her obligation to live just and compassionate lives honoring the poor, the outcast and the sojourner. The storm reflects the political turmoil caused by the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions—the two political powers at this time. The time in the belly of the fish represents the time of exile in Babylon. The vomiting of Jonah and Yahweh's second call to go to Nineveh is seen as the restoration and the renewed opportunities following their return to Israel. Jonah's bitterness, his pouting over the plant and chastising of God for God's mercy toward the Ninivites demonstrates the prejudice toward outsiders, the exclusivity and narrow attitude within the Jerusalem community following the exile. The anonymous Hebrew writer told the story of Jonah to confront this narrow perspective, this provincialism, to offer his listeners an opportunity to repent, to turn around, and to have a change of heart.

The irony in the story is the hated Ninivites turn around and have a change of heart. Yahweh turns around and has a change of heart—but Jonah's stubbornness persists. He prefers death to acknowledging God's favor to anyone but himself. The real tragedy is that Jonah is not a bad man. In fact, he's the only professedly religious character in the story. According to early 20th century Scottish pastor and theologian, Graham Scroggie: *Jonah's one devastating weakness is his individualism. To all who are not of the same mind and attainment as himself, he is cold, unsympathetic, arrogant, patronizing, proud and cruel.*

He goes on: *Jonah is a big man tricked by his very bigness into smallness, a good man who consumes his own goodness and becomes a moral bankrupt in the eyes of the world.* (pause)

The message of Jonah is relevant for all people, especially those of us who profess to be religious. In his book Reverence Paul Woodruff reminds us that faith is not always reverent. He writes, *because the faithful may hold their faith with arrogance and self-satisfaction.* Tragically the history of religion, time and time again, reveals this attitude within people of faith.

Jonah's message is universal and timeless. As we hear it this morning in a very different context from when it was first told within the Hebrew community—we, too, see the Jonah's around us. And if we're honest we see ourselves in Jonah... in his stubbornness when things don't go his way...in his pouting. We see ourselves in his arrogance, chastising God for being too merciful.

We see ourselves in his self-centeredness, cursing a plant that gave him shade one day and was gone the next.

When we have been where Jonah is and someone loves us enough to help us see the absurdity of our perspective; we have the opportunity to pause, to take a “time out,” to chuckle at ourselves, and to wonder how our way, our perspective, and our opinion consumed any goodness within us. We have the opportunity to repent and to turn around!

The story of Jonah asks those of us who follow Christ, to examine our prejudices, our stereotypes, our biases, our preconceived notions, our disdain of those who are different than we are and to remember that God’s steadfast love, God’s mercy is extended even to “the Ninevites” of our world.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the calamity God would do to them, and did not do it.

God turns around, God changes God’s mind. The story of Jonah is asking each of us “Can we?” Amen.