

Epiphany 3 B
Jonah 1:1-2:1, 2:10-3:5, 3:10-4:11
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Notes not for publication

Reader: Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Away from the presence of the Lord. Like there is such a place. But Jonah seemed to think he could find it. God had called him to go to Nineveh, the land of the hated Assyrians, to preach to them that they needed to straighten up and get right with God. You'd think maybe he wouldn't mind delivering such a tough message to people he thought were so bad. But you have to think ahead—what might be the possible outcome if he did what God asked? If he told the people of Nineveh to repent, and they did, then what? Whatever he was thinking, we find Jonah on a boat, trying to run to a place where God wouldn't find him. See how that turned out for him.

Reader: But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten

it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'

The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

So we have these sailors from who-knows-where much more concerned with satisfying God than Jonah is, and it's not even their God. Jonah finally resigns himself to what is happening.

Reader: Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. Jonah said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we

pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

"It's Me, It's Me, O Lord" 352

Reader: But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish... Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

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. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across.

"Excavations at the site of the ancient city [of Nineveh] have revealed a town about one and a half miles in diameter—not one that would require a three-day journey to cross" (*Preaching Through the Christian Year - B*, p. 83). The story asks us to imagine a fish big enough to take in Jonah's whole body and to protect him from the ocean for three days and three nights. These fanciful details are a sign to us of the extreme nature of

what's happening in the story, of the measures God is willing to take.

Reader: Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Hymn – "Depth of Mercy" 355

So by this point in the story, nearly everyone has repented, one way or another. The sailors did everything they could to try to make God happy and ended up as converts, making sacrifices and vows. The people of Nineveh, and even their king, repented of all the terrible things they must have done; they put on sackcloth and sat down in the dirt to fast and pray. And last but not least, God has repented of the destruction planned for this foreign nation. They've all looked at themselves, each at his or her current path, and have decided to change direction and do something different. Nearly all have repented; that just leaves one more person—

Reader: But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' 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.

The Lord God appointed a bush, 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 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.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' 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. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

The story leaves us with God's question unanswered and Jonah's situation unresolved. Will he finally give in? Or will he persist in his resistance to God's call? "I'd rather die

than see you save these people!" It's as if God turns and asks the final question of us—"should I not be worried about this all these people whom I made but who don't know how much I love them—and about all the animals I put in their care? Am I not supposed to care what happens to them?"

My guess is that most of us would answer that of course God should be concerned about these people, that Jonah's attitude is far too narrow and self-centered. That's what I hope most of us would say, anyway. But Jonah's outright resistance may be just an expression of how many of us might feel, if we're really honest. It's not that we would say, "these people over here, and these other ones over here, should not be included in God's invitation of grace." I would venture to say that a lot of people in this congregation would even include people of other faiths and of no faith at all in the scope of God's love and forgiveness. God is a big God, bigger than our understanding or our experience.

But believing that is one thing, and making room for the upshot of that belief is another. It is one thing to believe that God loves and calls all people and another to change what I do in my life of faith as a result of that belief. What might this all-encompassing love of God for the world mean for us, as individual Christians and as a church?

Yesterday some of your leaders and I attended the Austin District My Job Workshop. We heard a wonderful plenary address by the district superintendent, or DS, Bobbi Kaye Jones; I hope to share more details of her talk with you in the future. But for today what I want to relate to you is her proclamation, really, that mainline Christianity, of which we are a part, must experience either deep change or slow death. She told us that while the area in and around Austin is growing and shifting tremendously, the church as a whole basically is remaining static.

Our own statistics show good, steady growth over the past 10 years, with dips here and there. But maintenance of the status quo is not an option. It feels like it's possible and might actually be so for a period of time, but the fact is that every church resides someplace along the congregational life cycle: birth, vitality, stability, unrecognized decline, recognized decline, and death. Change is happening; the question is whether change will be intentional, in a deep fashion that leads to new growth, or, whether by default or design, a journey instead down the road of decline and into death. The Transformation program we've been engaged in has been an effort to seek the intentional, deep growth kind of change.

The challenge we heard yesterday is to rethink the way we look at what we do in the church. Rev. Jones told us to look at outcomes instead of activities. Rather than looking inward at how well we maintain what we've always done, our challenge is to look outward and to ask how what we do speaks to people who aren't here yet. We do all the things Methodist churches do, but what is the outcome of those activities; how is the world different as a result? The DS also challenged us to take risks. Again, we do the things churches do, but where have we done a new thing in order to achieve a new outcome? Where have we put ourselves on the line to address a pressing issue in the world around us?

This is an amazingly gifted church, one full of people who are committed to ministry, committed to sharing the good news of Christ's grace and forgiveness with the world, no matter who the recipient might be. I am so grateful for you, and I would place this congregation squarely in the midst of the "vitality" section of the church life cycle, poised for yet another leap ahead. Our Transformation program has yielded some important ministry priorities, which your Church Council is taking seriously and will be implementing in the coming year. The officers of the Council are meeting as a Steering Committee and will hold all of us accountable to what we say we want to get done.

And all the while, new folks are coming, looking for a word of truth, a place of rooting, a community of others who don't know all the answers but are willing to live in the question. God is calling us beyond ourselves, brothers and sisters, not to get our numbers up, but to deepen our understanding and experience of grace and to think toward the outside, toward the ones who are hurting, nearby and far away. Jonah sought to protect his own righteousness, not just from the Ninevites, but even from the call of God. Think instead about what you might say or do to extend God's gracious invitation beyond our typical stomping grounds. Think about what God might be calling us to as a body, how God might seek to use us and this church's particular gifts in the service of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

I want to tell you a story about a girl named Imogene. Imogene had a "Why Day." Have you every had a "Why Day?" That's a day when you say "why" a lot. When Imogene woke up in the morning the sun was shining straight into her window. When her mother came in, she saw Imogene sitting on her bed looking out the window. "Why does the sun come up in the morning?" Imogene asked. "Because God wants everybody to see what they are doing," her mother said. "Oh," said Imogene. Later in the day, the sky got dark and it began to rain. Imogene and her mother went to the window to watch it rain. "Why does it rain?" Imogene asked.

"Because God wants everybody to have something to drink," her mother said.

"Why is it raining all over everywhere? Why doesn't it just rain in a drinking glass?" Imogene asked.

"Because God wants everything to have a drink," her mother said.

"See the flower how its little head moves each time a drop of rain lands on it? It's getting a drink too."

As they watched, the water began to run down the street. "Why is the rain running away?" Imogene asked.

"It's running down to where the fish live because God wants the fish to have a drink too," her mother said.

"Oh," said Imogene.

That night after Imogene had gotten in her pajamas, they read a Bible story, and after the Bible story Imogene said, "Why do we always read a Bible story before I go to bed?"

"Do you remember why the sun comes up in the morning?" her mother asked.

"So everybody can see?" said Imogene.

"That's right," said her mother. "And do you remember why the rain falls everywhere?"

"So everybody can have a drink?" said Imogene.

"That's right," said her mother. "And do you know why God gave us the Bible?"

"I don't know that," Imogene said.

"It's because God wants everyone to know it is God who gives us light to see and God who gives us water to drink and God who loves the fish and the flower and God who loves you and me and everybody. That's why we read the Bible," her mother said.

And Imogene said, "Oh."

Then they said a prayer like this, "Thank you God for loving us and everybody and telling us about it in the Bible. Amen."

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