

## Reluctant Prophet

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The Bible is full of scenes of people answering God's call. Last week, we heard the story of the call of Samuel, who hears God calling in the night but takes a bit to figure out who is calling to him. We also heard the story of Jesus calling Philip, who told Nathaniel to come and see Jesus, even as he wondered how anything good could come out of a town like Nazareth. Today we heard Mark's account of the calling of the disciples, as Peter, Andrew, James, and John leave their boats and nets behind to follow Jesus.

But the other call story we heard today is the more interesting one. Jonah, the reluctant prophet. Now we know the story pretty well. It makes for a cute kids story since there's a whale, or at least a big fish in it. But because it's so familiar, we often miss what's really happening, why Jonah was so reluctant, and why God was so persistent.

To see that, we have to remember this reading from Jonah 3, this call of Jonah, is the second time Jonah was called by God. Jonah was called by God to go preach to the people of Nineveh to call them to repentance. First, some context. Calling a Jewish prophet to go to Nineveh would be like calling someone from Ames to go to Iowa City, or someone from Chicago to go to St. Louis. Worse

than that, actually. It would be as if someone from our present day US were sent to Tehran or Kabul or Pyongyang. It's as if someone from the previous generation in the US were sent to Hanoi or Moscow; or to Berlin or Tokyo during the build-up before WWII. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a large, ruthless military machine. The atrocities their military committed still don't make for easy reading. Nineveh, as the capital, was so disliked and despised that, when the Assyrian Empire fell, it was so totally destroyed that it remained buried under the desert sands for over 2500 years. No one liked Nineveh, least of all citizens of Israel who were forced to pay outrageous tribute or face the wrath of the Assyrian armies.

So instead of following God's call to preach to that city, those people, Jonah ran from his call. Jonah didn't just run; he headed in the opposite direction, as far away in the known world as he could go. Instead of heading northeast across the desert to Nineveh (which is near the city of Mosul in modern day Iraq), Jonah heads west, to a seaport, to sail as far away as possible, maybe even to Spain.

God doesn't give up that easily. God sends a storm at the ship that Jonah is riding on. In order to save the ship, Jonah is thrown into the sea and spends a few

days in the belly of a great fish sent by God. That's chapter 1 of the book of Jonah, the part of the story we are most familiar with. With the extended time out to think about what he'd done, Jonah composes a song that takes up most of chapter 2.

When Jonah gets spit up onto shore, we come to the reading for today, from chapter three. "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time." God calls Jonah again, and gives him the same mission. This time, Jonah goes to Nineveh, where he preaches the shortest sermon on record. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Only five words in Hebrew!)

The response to this short, smelly, bitter message is that Jonah gets the whole city to repent. In the verses that got skipped in the reading, we see that the whole city, even down to the animals, puts on sackcloth and ashes, in an act of communal repentance. The message worked! God's word was spoken and heard, and everyone repented.

That, too, isn't the end of the story. It seems like it would be a good place to end. God's mission has been accomplished. Nineveh repents and is spared God's wrath. Everything is as it should be. Just say they lived happily ever after, roll the credits, and that's that.

But that's not the end of the story. While there is much rejoicing by God at the change in Nineveh, Jonah is not doing any rejoicing. After preaching that short sermon and seeing the response it received, Jonah tells God "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:2-3).

Jonah wasn't a reluctant prophet because he was afraid of God's wrath, or afraid he would fail in his mission. He was reluctant, he ran because he knew what God would do if the people did repent, and that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to watch fire and brimstone. He wanted to see God's wrath rain down on these people he so hated, on his enemies. He wanted judgment. But he doesn't get it.

Jonah then goes up to a hillside to watch God send in the fire and brimstone. Instead, the only thing he sees die is the plant that was giving him shade. God uses that as an object lesson. Jonah cared more about the plant than about his fellow humans. The God who knows when a hair falls or a bird dies cares even about the people who were actively trying

to subjugate and eliminate God's chosen people. That's how much God cares. That's who God cares about.

In Jesus, God again brings a call to repentance and a message of salvation not just to the people of Israel, but to those of surrounding areas, and even to some who worked for or even were the occupying Romans. Jesus pointed back to the sign of Jonah, saying that "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:39). Jesus was then called by God to go to the cross, where he would die for the sins of the whole world. But where Jonah ran, Jesus went willingly. Jesus even prayed for his enemies. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Then Jesus spent three days in the tomb before rising that first Easter to show us that the stink of sin and death had been defeated. He sent his apostles out to share that message of forgiveness with the whole world, even those that wanted to kill them. And they did.

Who are you reluctant to love? Maybe it's those people who went to one of those marches in Washington this weekend. Maybe it's the people in Washington who caused the shutdown this week. Maybe it's people who you strongly disagree with politically. Maybe it's people who support a team that just

keeps making your team lose. Maybe it's people from other countries who threaten us. But God's love is for them, just as God's love is for you. Jesus died for them, just as he died for you. God doesn't desire their destruction any more than He desires yours.

Magician and atheist Penn Jillette tells a story about this. One day after one of his magic shows, one of the audience members who had participated in it came backstage to see him. The man complimented Jillette on the show, and then said, "I brought this for you." The man held up a small book. It was a New Testament with the Psalms, something that could fit in a person's pocket. (Sounds like it was maybe a Gideon's Bible?) "I wrote in the front of it," the man said, "and I wanted you to have this." The man explained he was a businessman and not crazy.

Jillette, moved by the man's gesture, recalled: "He was kind, and nice, and sane, and looked me in the eyes, and talked to me, and then gave me this Bible."

"I've always said," Jillette explained, "I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe there is a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially

awkward. How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?”

Jonah’s hate for the people of Nineveh was great. Yet God’s love for them, and for Jonah, was even greater. God loved Jonah so much that he used a big fish and storm to give Jonah a second chance. God loved the people of Nineveh so much he used even a reluctant prophet to call them to repentance. And then he loved them all so much he came into the world in Jesus. What great love that is.

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