

A Sermon
"LESSON'S FROM **THE** BELLY OF A FISH"
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SCRIPTURE: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah **arose** and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

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

Children's Sermon

One of the things that children really enjoy, and maybe there's a child in all of us, is story telling. Don't you like stories? And when somebody tells a great story you are just captivated. In the Hebrew culture, stories were magnificent. My guess is that in many of the indigenous cultures around the world, including the Native American Culture in the area that we live in, the stories...the oral tradition...is absolutely remarkable.

I want you to think of the story of Jonah as something you listen to sitting around a campfire.

Once there was a prophet. His name was Jonah. And God said to him, "Jonah, I want you to go to Nineveh. The people there are naughty...they are just plumb NASTY. And I'm going to give them one chance to change their lives. Now you go as fast as you can and you give them the news. They have to repent of all of their sins or their lives they are going to lose." "No way", said Jonah. "Not me. I'm not going. I'm not going to go to that crew at all. You know, they deserve what they get."

I know what I'll do. I'll **buy** a ticket on a ship that goes in the opposite direction. And I'm just going to get out of God's way and let God do what God's **gonna** do.

So Jonah hopped ship just to try to get out of God's way, thinking very little about what his actions were going to cause in the lives of other people. His actions would soon make others pay.

Strong winds came. Roaring waves. The crew on the ship became very afraid. The ship was soon going to break apart. They prayed to their Gods. They wept and they wailed that nothing happen. The mighty storm prevailed. The sailors grew desperate and they soon cast lots...that is, they began to gamble...to find out who it was on the ship that was making all the trouble. On Jonah the lot fell.

Now Jonah probably knew what was going on, but he, like a lot of us, liked to stick his head in the sand. So you know what Jonah **was** doing during the storm? He was sleeping. He was down in the hold of the ship sleeping.

The sailors knew what to do, though. There was nothing that was going to save them from the storm unless they could toss Jonah overboard. Jonah said, "Pick me up and throw me in. It's the only way to stop this storm." As soon as Jonah got into the water the waves ceased and the winds quit **blowing** and all became quiet and the sailors

watched as Jonah sank beneath the waves. And they were sure that Jonah had seen his last.

But Jonah didn't make it to the bottom of the sea. God gave a great fish...in fact, it was such a big fish that the fish could swallow Jonah whole and did. He slurped Jonah right up. And in the belly of the fish, he stayed for three whole days.

Now Jonah was in a predicament. The story says that it wasn't very nice down there. In fact he had seaweed wrapped around his head...that slimy stuff, you know. Have you felt it on your toes when you get in the lake. **OOOOHHHHH!**

But, at the end of three days, and Jonah's prayer...because he prayed, "Okay, God, I know you're talking to me."...the great fish burped him up on the coast. (I could act that out but I'm not going to. It would make a great campfire story, wouldn't it?)

This time, Jonah went off to Nineveh. And he went to that big city and it said it was big enough that it would take him 3 days to walk all the way around it. So it was a pretty good sized town. And he kept saying to the people, "**Repent!** Repent! Turn around. Change your ways or God's going to get you."

Now to Jonah's great surprise, the people did what the preacher said. (That wasn't for the kids.) They put on sack cloth and ash and they proclaimed a great feast and they said they were sorry. And God changed his mind. He repented that he was going to hurt them and he decided that they would be okay. And the people were ecstatic. They danced in the street and they sang in the attics.

But Jonah said, "You rascal, God, I knew you'd forgive them. Doggone you! I mean, I come in here and tell them that they are all going to die and then you change your mind. I mean, what kind of guy does that make me?" So Jonah pouted.

Now you've never been there, have you? When you didn't get your way. Jonah pouted. And do you know what he did?

Now...**Nineveh** is in a part of the world that is very, very, very **HOT**...almost like a desert. So Jonah decided he was going to sit outside the walls in the sun and just let time take its course. And God saw Jonah and said, "Poor, silly boy!. Aren't you even going to take care of yourself?"

And so God caused a gourd...a big plant...to grow up and it provided Jonah with shade. And Jonah was **SO** Happy. What a **gift!** What a wonderful thing. 24 hours later, God caused the gourds to wilt. And Jonah **was** upset again. And so he has this conversation with God and God says, "Jonah! You are so concerned about a gourd and you've invested so much in this gourd, and I'm going to do with the gourd what I want to. Why don't you see the people of Nineveh in the same way? I am going to treat people as I choose to treat them regardless of what you might think!"

And so the story of Jonah ends with the understanding that God is in charge and that our job...our task **as** human beings...as the people of God...is to simply be obedient and **let** God take care of the outcome. Thanks, kids!!!! If you read the second chapter of the Book of Jonah carefully, you'll find that it is really a collection of many of the Psalms. So there is an interesting weaving of Biblical story in history in this book.

Well, Bill told you a bit of the story and I really told you the whole story of Jonah. It's a short book, only four chapters. It's one that you can read in a very short period of time and if you want to read it to your grandchildren and your children, it's a great story.

But it's a story much like many of the ancient stories...we're not exactly sure where it comes from. We don't really know what the context was even...when it was really put into being. My guess is that it was an oral story...that it was told at campfires and at significant moments to the Hebrews and others over and over and over before it was put into some sort of form and preserved as we understand it and know it today. You **might** be interested to know that there are similar stories in other religions...big fish stories...and so it may be one of those archetypal stories that really lie at the heart of our understanding of the human family and our struggle. Even Biblical scholars are struggling with the story. In fact, they range anywhere from 800 BC to 500 BC in the conception...when this story was formalized within the framework of Jewish history. And so Jonah, while he is considered to be one of the minor prophets, is a very fascinating character.

If we take the story and we work with it quite literally, it becomes a mission story. I listen to God's call...I don't want to hear God's call...**God** kind of changes my mind and sends me off. I go and when I get there I do what I'm supposed to do but I'm not very darned happy about it. And God ought to really do what he was supposed to do with them anyhow. And if God is unchanging, why did He change His mind in the first place. This is one of the huge questions that I think we have to struggle with in the context of this story.

But, for me, the story has profound psychological value...profound developmental value in terms of us coming of age in our own lives. The first lesson that it seems to teach me as a story...as I've listened to it over and over...I mean it was one of the first stories I remember in Sunday School...almost the first one, beyond Adam and Eve and maybe the Tower of Babel...you know, Jonah's right up there in the top five. So I lived with this story and I've studied it and I've read it...I can't tell you how many times I've read the Book. And each time I come at it...I think this is the way it is with sacred **literature..sacred** story...is that every time you come at it, you plumb something new...you plumb something richer...more wonderful out of it. It turns your head around, It makes you think differently about it.

For me, the first lesson that I learned out of this text if I think about it as a psychological treatise is that I really can't hide **from** God. Now if Jung was saying that, he'd really say, "You really can't hide from yourself." And there is some profound truth in that statement. Who in the world do you have to face up to, anyhow, but yourself! Who is your worst critic but **self**? Who is the easiest person in the world to delude? To fool? **GOTCHA! Hmmmm?**

The story of Jonah, **from** my perception is this struggle with a man going into himself to determine what he is made of and he goes into the abyss...the kind of dark night of the soul that the mystics talk about where he loses sight of everything. And that's the image

of the whale, isn't it...being buried and cast into the depths. If you look at the psychological literature and the dream literature...the ocean is always considered to be the unconscious...those things that we don't understand or have any knowledge of. So we are caught up and we're buried, as it were, in that un-conscious. And if we endure it, if we are able to live through it, we get belched out on the other side. We probably don't look very good or smell very good, but **THERE WE ARE**. But our priorities have changed and we look at life a lot differently.

Now my guess is that in our world...and probably in the world historically...there have been numerous ways that we have avoided dealing with **God/self**. My guess is that one of our attractions to addiction in our lives...be it alcohol or drugs or sex or sports or a myriad of other things that we can talk about...is really a way of divesting ourselves of that journey...that struggle...that we are supposed to work through...that idea that we have to come to some kind of understanding of God in us. I want you to know, folks, that you can run but you can't hide. God's "gonna get ya". And I don't mean that as a threat. If you sustain your life of integrity, the voice of God is going to continue to speak to you and call you...to use a Biblical word...to **REPENT**.

Now, that's not so much confession of my sins. Repenting is understanding and turning around and going a different direction. Linda and I sang a song some years ago..'I Cannot Hide From God, No Matter How I Try...though mountains cover me, I'll not escape His eye. I've wandered near and far, and yet His voice I hear, I **KNOW** that I can never hide **from** God."

The second thing I learned from this story is that crisis transforms me. If we could take that framework literally, I can't imagine what it would feel like to jump off a ship in the ocean. Have you ever been out there? It's **OMINOUS**. That's a **BIG POND!** And the thought of jumping off a ship in a storm is something beyond my ability. **THAT'S CRISIS!** Now, my guess is that every person in this room has been in psychological crisis and you've been in one way of a storm in your life. It might be the ending of a marriage; it could be the death of a child; it could be the loss of a job; there are myriad ways that we are plunged into crisis in our lives. And crisis transforms us. In my work with the dying, often times when I'm working with the families, I often say to them, "Grief will transform you. You are not going to be the same person on the other side."

Sometimes people decide to give up. I've watched it happen a hundred times. 'I won't invest in life again'. You may know those people too. You may have experienced that with someone you love and you care for. I could tell you story after story after story of people who, in the crisis, say, "I can't re-invest." However, if you can, and if you do, it begins to open you up to whole new possibilities and understandings. Even the same old struggles 'going to Nineveh' look different. And you can go.

There is going to be some residual effect...let me **tell** you that. Jonah didn't get out of it altogether. He still struggled with what was going on with him and he still was struggling with his understanding of 'not being able to hide **from** God'. But he went. And he was obedient and he did what he needed to do to **BECOME**.

I said in our church **class** this morning that I don't think the story has anything to do with Nineveh. I think it has everything to do with Jonah growing up and becoming. And Nineveh was just one of the props.

The circumstances in your life **often** times are just the props. They're TOUGH. Don't get me wrong. When you're fighting with a fellow employee, or you're struggling with a boss that just doesn't understand and is obnoxious and capricious and has no interest in your well being, that's tough. But the tenor, the issue is, "What do you do with it? How do we grow?" **I believe that crisis transforms us.**

The third thing I've learned from this story is that God is much more willing to forgive than I am willing to be forgiven. You know, we've kind of made God out to be the 'hard guy'. We've really made God out to be this sort of 'ogre'. ...if we don't measure up, God's not going to love us. But it seems to me that in the context of this story, God never gave up on anyone.

Historically, the Ninevites were Assyrians and they were the arch enemies of the Hebrews. If there were a people that the Hebrews were **afraid** of, it was the Assyrians. The Assyrians were the folks who came in and took Babylon in one night and took 'old **Nebby**' (Nebuchadnezzar) to the cleaners. So, there's power in that story in the sense that God sends Jonah to Nineveh. But even the worst folks in the world, God loves. I don't think God has any enemies...at least from His side. We might be the enemies of God.

I grew up with the idea that God was un-changeable, was un-movable, immutable...that God was **ultimately** completely consistent. And I could work all kinds of ways trying to figure out how to get around that. But finally in my life I had to give up and decide that **GOD IS JUST PLAIN GRACIOUS and HE LOVES US.** And He loves us in such a way that we can come back again and again and again and again.

Jonah is a good story. It's a great tale. And it has profound truth. You've all been there. We've all done it. Strange the lessons we learn in the belly of the fish.