

Jan 25 - Do I Have To?

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

I love the story of Jonah. It is one of those tales in the Bible that has to be taken with a grain of salt. Like Aesop and his fables, the writers of the Bible, at times, could tell a good story with humor and irony. Jonah is one such tale. In case you have forgotten the story, and our scripture comes in the middle of events, let me remind you of it. The people of Israel at this time were under occupation by the Ninevites. Jonah, a prophet of God to the Hebrew people, hears this word from God. Go to the Ninevites and proclaim their destruction unless they repent. Jonah wants nothing to do with this message. Instead of heading for Ninevah he goes to Tarshish which in the opposite direction and books passage. He didn't care where he was going as long as it was as far away from that place as he could get.

They are underway just a brief time when a storm arises. We find that the foreign sailors are more religious than Jonah, God's prophet. They are praying and asking for deliverance and Jonah sits there sulking. Finally he admits to the captain that he is the cause of this great storm and the only way to save the ship and those on board is to pitch him into the sea. Even then the captain tries to save Jonah. Finally when all else fails the captain throws Jonah overboard. He is swallowed by a great fish sometimes translated whale, and the storm ceases. Down inside the fish he finally comes to himself and prays for forgiveness. I would hope that a storm and being swallowed by a whale should do that! Then the fish's digestion can't process an angry prophet and spits him out. Jonah finds himself closer to Ninevah than ever and as he is drying himself out he hears again the word to go to Ninevah.

We have been there, haven't we? Oh I don't mean that we have physically run away from God and gotten swallowed by a whale. But we have heard the word of God to do something and we reject it. We try almost everything to keep from following that word of God.

What are some of these occasions? We are deeply wounded by the actions of another. We hear the word to forgive them and we let our pain and our woundedness

get in the way of forgiveness. Like Jonah we figure out a way to try and go in another direction. Instead of forgiving them we spend much time and energy reliving the past painful incidents to justify our angry feelings.

We feel called to do something, whether that is serving on a committee or to go visit someone in a care facility. We really don't want to do it. We think the task is uninteresting or would take more time than we want to free up or we just don't like going into care facilities because it makes us feel vulnerable. Again, like Jonah we take on other responsibilities so we have no free time or we book a trip so we are not around to visit.

We hear a challenge to be involved in a study. We know it would be good for us but we don't want to take the time to prepare or attend. Like Jonah we pretend we don't know about the event or that we are not the least bit interested.

My guess is those strategies, and ones like them worked about as well for you as Jonah's catching a boat worked for him. My guess is that you encountered a storm in your life. In trying hard to not forgive and keep those angry feelings alive you were successful but that anger poisons all sorts of other relationships that you wanted. Most of all it poisons your relationship with God. In getting busy so as to not do the thing you feel you should be doing usually robs those other events of some of the joy they had in the past because you feel guilty. And yes you might ignore the study. People do it all the time but I, as a pastor, hear the longing and wistfulness of people when they say, "I wish I knew..."

So, part of the story of Jonah is that faith is not just about doing the things we want to do but agreeing to do things that we don't want to do because they are for the better good of all. Things don't go well when we resist the impulse to do these things. All of us have stories I am sure of where we have been prodded by God again and again, just like Jonah, until we finally get it and do the work.

And, in case you forget the story Jonah finally turns toward Ninevah. In Hebrew his sermon is just five words long. You can see he wasn't trying very hard. He preached judgment and no grace. But the people respond. Even the king hears the words as

being from God and commands all to put on sackcloth, even the animals, and fast and pray. Jonah is the most successful prophet in the entire Old Testament. No one has success like him. It would be like Billy Graham, in days of old, coming into town without all of the advance planning, without the reserved stadium and great musicians and standing on the street corner saying repent and having the entire town from the mayor to the worst ruffian on the street change their ways.

Was Jonah happy? Here is where the humor gets really strong. No, he is not happy. In fact, he is angry with God. Why? Because he knew God was a merciful God who was quick to forgive. Jonah had been afraid all along that if he did what God had asked this very thing would happen. He didn't want God to be merciful to the Ninevites. He wanted God to pound them out of existence. In spite of Jonah's peevishness God again forgives him and helps him to understand that grace and mercy, even for one's enemies, is a good thing.

So what does all of this say to us today? First, we worship a God of first and second and twenty third chances. Jonah was given a second chance. He was forgiven even after that chance when he wasn't happy with the outcome of his preaching. The people of Ninevah were given a second chance. This means that when we hear from God a message to do something and we think, "No Way!" and head off in the other direction God is patient. God will continue to work with us and challenge us because God wants what is best for us.

The second message is even more important. Think of a person that you find difficult to love. You need to hear first the message that God loves that person. Jonah and the people of Israel hated the Ninevites. Jonah rejected God's call to preach repentance because he wanted the Ninevites to be punished. He kept hearing God loves them and wanted them to have a second chance. That was a hard message for Jonah to hear and it is still a hard message for us. But we need to hear that message for we need that Grace.

There is an old joke about the man who dies and goes to heaven. He is incensed when he sees who is in heaven. There are many he knows. He knew their past and

what they had done. He was absolutely shocked that they were allowed into heaven. He was just about ready to go up to Saint Peter and let him know about who he had let in when he noticed the looks on the other's faces and realized they were just as shocked to see that he had been admitted to heaven!

The same God who gave Jonah a second chance gives the people of Nineveh a second chance, and gives us a second chance. We can't begrudge that kind of mercy for others for we need it for ourselves. This is a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. This is a God we know most fully in Jesus Christ. So, the next time we feel called by God to do something, we should strive to do it to our best ability instead of trying to run in the opposite direction. As we are faithful, even in the hard things of life we will find grace and strength for the task and we will find the love and mercy God wants to shower down on all of us.