

Kirk of St James
Sermon “The Choice is up to You”
Sunday September 20th, 2020
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I love the book of Jonah and how it weaves so many different elements into four short chapters. Normally the last chapter of Jonah is the only one in the revised common lectionary and this year I wanted to cover more of the story, because I feel like a lot of what makes it such a powerful little book is lost otherwise. Taken as a whole this account seems next to ridiculous. We have a reluctant prophet, a storm and a boat, a whale, a bush, a worm, and a big-sin city. What follows is an incredible narrative that teaches us about God and about ourselves. It is worth noting that some people disagree with how best to read Jonah. It is a parable, it is prophetic, some people feel it is literal, and others feel it is figurative but, however you choose to read it, it still has some important things for us to consider in our faith lives.

We know the start of the story well; Jonah is called by God to go and speak to the people of Nineveh and tell them to repent. Jonah refuses and steals away on a boat hoping to get beyond the reach of God. Instead he finds himself cast into the sea during a storm and swallowed by a giant fish which is where our reading picked up today. It is rather bizarre when you think about it, the disgruntled prophet sloshing around in the giant fish’s stomach. With what one can assume is only time to think we hear Jonah pray this prayer of lament and oddly enough thanksgiving.

One of the things that has always struck me about Jonah chapter two is how well it describes total despair and depression in the first verses. That feeling of being cast down into a pit, with things choking you and dragging at you, until there is nothing, but suffocating darkness

left. There in brokenness Jonah comes face to face with his hope in God. In that moment Jonah seems to profoundly change, to understand what is going on and what it feels like to receive the grace of God. This is the good news story ark we want to see. It promises a happy ending with the newly changed Jonah happily fulfilling his call by God. Things started out rocky but now here we are, and everything is going to be okay.

Instead we have a sullen prophet who barely preaches or says anything, he simply proclaims “40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That is the message we have recorded. Poor Jeremiah went on for chapters and chapters with no change. Some of the prophets were beaten and arrested and thrown in prison. Instead this simple message proclaimed in a city that was so big it took three days to walk across caused instant repentance from the lowliest quarters right through to the King. In fact, they took the message so seriously that even the livestock were to fast and wear sackcloth. The reaction is so swift and so immediate you could almost imagine a Monty Python sketch where the prophets fight over who gets to go to Nineveh. “Oh sure, Jonah gets the good gig, he gets to go to Nineveh, so lucky to only get eaten by a whale and then spit out onto dry land, I wish my job was that easy.”

So, you wonder if Jonah will come around. He has that moment in the belly of the fish where he seems to come face to face with God and his faith. He did what God asked and despite himself was incredibly successful. He saved an entire city of 120 000 people and all the livestock. That seems like it should be good news. Instead Jonah is livid with God. He says “this is why I didn’t want to do this, you are too good, and too nice and too loving and you just forgave them, I would rather die than live in a world where you do that.” Then he walks away and finds a spot to watch from hoping that God might change his mind and destroy the city.

Instead God says “well, if you want to be that way Jonah, lets try something else.” And we have the whole encounter with the shade from the bush, the bush being killed by the worm, and Jonah being so hot and angry at the whole situation he wants to die again. God tries to reason with him, but we don’t know if Jonah ever understands because it ends with Gods question to Jonah. Did he finally understand? Did he walk away angry? It is a profoundly unsatisfying ending but, it leaves the choice of the response in our hands.

When you take these four chapters together is weaves a story that verges on the absurd. There is humour purposely woven throughout this account. We are meant to stand by and shake our heads at Jonah only to realize at the end we may not be so different.

One of the first things this story encourages us to do is “to consider the ways in which God speaks to us and the ways we listen, for it is in this in-between space that our lives and the mission of the church come together.” We may have moments in our lives where we hear the call of God and it seems like the easiest thing in the world to answer. We may also have moments like Jonah when what is being asked of us is something we would rather run from because it seems too monumental a task. In whatever we choose we are pursued by a God who loves us and will not let us go. We pray for the courage to answer God’s call in our life whenever we hear it, and for the strength to face it if it feels difficult.

This account is also an important reminder that how we listen matters. In chapter two it seemed like Jonah had his “aha” moment and going forward he was going to live in the light of what he learned. As we quickly see though Jonah allows his patterns, habits, and anger to follow him. Jonah may have listened, but he did not let God’s voice and love permeate his life. He did not allow God’s grace to soften and change his heart. Instead he clung to all his

preconceived notions and anger so that even when he finally obeyed God's call he did not grow.

It reminds me of a presbyterian missionary named Pauline Brown I met a few years ago. She had spent her life working in India. She once told me that there was a difference between travelling and travelling with your eyes open. What she meant was that sometimes people look for what they can get out of an experience and go into it with a very clear idea of what they want, entirely missing the joy of the journey, and unable to appreciate the time because it did not look as they wished. The beauty of the journey, the experiences, the joys, and the growth are lost much as Jonah missed out on what God was trying to teach him.

Jonah was so angry at God he could not appreciate his love, justice, and mercy. He did not care that he had been miraculously saved, that he had saved an entire city from destruction, and that despite his poor attitude that God never gave up on him. Jonah was too caught up in his own idea of what justice should look like, and how he wanted things to happen. I believe this story with its subtle humour, absurd timeline of events, and over the top responses also has the potential to be one of the saddest stories in the bible because it demonstrates how being closed off from God and his voice in our lives can keep us trapped in the small self-imposed limits we place on ourselves and the world. That we miss out on the incredible love, power, and promise that are possible only with God. The story of Jonah ends on a question; it is up to us to figure out how to answer it. God has given us the choice just as he gave Noah. May we choose wisely.